

**American Literature during the Age of Reason and the Revolutionary
Period
(1750-1800)**

Introduction

By the end of the 1700s, the Puritan influence on America began to wane. In Europe of the Dark Age everything was interpreted by faith and emotion because of the dominance of religion and the church. Even poverty was considered as god's wrath that is why one cannot talk about humanitarianism at that time. The church together with the king with his divine right maintained their strong hold on the people's social and political life. In addition to this, it is worth adding that during that era the bible was the people's sole source of knowledge and laws.

After 1650 due to the development of science, Europe saw a real revolution in thought and there was a radical change in the Europeans' world vision. The emergence of scientists like Isaac Newton who contributed to the flourishing of the scientific revolution led to a remarkable shift in the way the truth is perceived. In fact, there was a real departure from the traditional ways of searching for truth. Soon faith and revelation were replaced by reason because the scientific revolution consolidated the use of reason in interpreting the mechanism of the universe. Scientists such as Newton could argue that there were natural laws that governed the universe. This, in fact, could put an end to the traditional idea of God's interference in everything in man's life. About this shift from the emotion to reason **Jonathan I. Israel** writes:

During the later Middle Ages and the early modern age down to 1650, everything was based on a largely shared core of faith, tradition, and authority, by contrast, after 1650, every thing no matter how fundamental or

deeply rooted was questioned in the light of philosophical reason and frequently challenged or replaced by startling different concepts generated by the New Philosophy and what may still usefully be termed as Scientific Revolution ¹.

Spurred by the work of many seventeenth-century thinkers—scientists such as Galileo and Newton, philosophers like Voltaire and Rousseau, and political theorist John Locke—the writers and thinkers of the Enlightenment valued reason over faith.

Unlike the Puritans, they had little interest in the hereafter, believing instead in the power of reason and science to further human progress.

They believed that people are by nature good, not evil

In contrast to the private soul-searching of the Puritans of New England, much of what was produced during the Revolutionary period was public writing.

This period of the American literature took place in the most important part of the history of the U.S.A because in that period was their independence. All the works were inspired by political things; puritan's belief had been forgotten.

The 18th-century American enlightenment as a movement marked by an emphasis on:

1. Rationality rather than tradition
2. Scientific inquiry instead of unquestioning religious doctrine
3. Representative government in place of monarchy.

Important writers: Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Patrick Henry, James Madison, and any other of the so-called “Founding Fathers.”

¹ Jonathan I. Israel *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*, (2002) p.56.

Enlightenment thinkers and writers, such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine, were devoted to the ideals of justice, liberty, and equality as the natural rights of man.

Genre/Style :Political Pamphlets, Travel Writing, and highly ornate persuasive writing.

Effect/Aspects :Patriotism and pride grows, creates unity about issues, and creates American character.

Historical Context :Encouraged Revolutionary War support.

Rationality

By the end of the 1700s, the Puritan influence on America began to decrease.

Writers used reason and logic –instead of the teachings of the Bible –to support their arguments.

People had come from all over Europe to the American colonies.

Of Course the colonists were NOT happy, overall, with the situation they were in

1. 1765 Parliament passes the Stamp Act, which taxes newspapers, almanacs, and legal documents in the colonies.
2. 1770 Boston Massacre (5 civilians die at the hands of British soldiers).
3. December 1773 The Boston Tea Party.
4. 1774 Intolerable Acts passed by King George III.
5. April 19, 1775 Revolutionary War begins.
6. July 4, 1776 Declaration of Independence approved by Second Continental Congress.
7. 1783 United States wins its independence.²

² <http://americanliteratureandgrammar.blogspot.com/2012/08/the-age-of-reason-or-revolutionary.html>

The most important pieces of literature during the AGE OF REASON, were political documents, speeches, and pamphlets(short, concise works that usually argue for or against a political cause.) and non-fiction was dominant (such as the forms mentioned above) was far more influential than fiction.³

Literary Production during the Revolutionary Age

1. The Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson (political document).
2. Patrick Henry's Speech to the Virginia Convention
3. Thomas Paine's The Crisis (pamphlet).
4. Works of Benjamin Franklin (aphorisms printed in *Poor Richard's Almanack*).⁴

Revolution in Language

1. Writing was less private and religiously based
2. Writing came away from the Plain Style and became full of flourish and colorful language
3. Writing was influenced by the Revolutionary War and the growing American spirit of individualism and self-reliance.⁵

The early essays of the period, Paine's *Common Sense* and the Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason, is the name given to the period in Europe and America during the 1700s when mankind was emerging from centuries of ignorance into a new age enlightened by reason, science, and respect for humanity. People of the Enlightenment were convinced that human

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

reason could (1) discover the natural laws of the universe and (2) determine the natural rights of mankind; (3) thereby unending progress in knowledge, technical achievement, and moral values would be realized.⁶

This new way of thinking led to the development of a new religious thought known as (4) Deism. Deists believed in God as a great inventor or architect who had created the universe then allowed it to function like a machine or clock without divine intervention. Although Deists believed in a hereafter, they believed human achievement and happiness should be the focus of this life rather than the life to come.

Benevolence toward less fortunate people, (5) humanitarianism, resulted. Difficult though it is for us to realize, the idea that people who are more fortunate should assist those who are less fortunate was, in fact, a new concept during the Enlightenment. Prior to this, religious beliefs perceived assistance to the unfortunate as interference with God because people thought if someone were unfortunate, it was God's will and was punishment for wrongdoing.⁷

The Historical Context of the American Revolutionary Literature

Economically speaking, new trade between countries generated new wealth. The newly wealthy tradesman and merchant class demanded a share of the social and political power formally held only by the nobility. As a result of the political and economic changes during the eighteenth century, there were major social changes as well. The former rigid class system based on inherited positions of nobility and wealth became far less secure.⁸

There were also major religious changes during the 1700s. There was a significant decline in church power and prestige, which resulted primarily from people's no

⁶ https://pamwmurphy.weebly.com/.../the_enlightenment_or_age_of_reason..

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ anthonyz33.weebly.com/the-age-of-reason.html

longer believing in God's daily involvement in their human affairs. Prior to the Enlightenment, before the discovery of natural laws, people had believed that every event that occurred, no matter how major or minor, was a direct result of God's intervention. Once scientists discovered that natural laws caused these occurrences, mankind feared God less, and as a result, religious obligations were no longer the primary concern of many people.⁹

Politically speaking, wars during the 1700s were most often fought within countries over secession to a throne rather than between countries. Monarchies still often ruled during the 1700s, but with less security than in earlier times. The English executed their king in 1642, France executed their king and queen (in 1793 and 1794 respectively) during the French Revolution, and other European monarchies soon fell. Royal instability suggested insecurity of the social order over which aristocracies had ruled.¹⁰

Rather than focusing on God and the church, people of the Enlightenment focused on man. Alexander Pope, a famous English poet, wrote a rhyming couplet (two consecutive lines of poetry that rhyme) that describes well the attitude of the time: "Know then thyself; presume not God to scan. / The proper study of mankind is man."¹¹

The eighteenth century recognized the interdependence of men on each other. Rather than the agricultural society prevalent during the previous feudal period, the 1700s saw the development of cosmopolitan society. People lived in clusters and depended upon each other rather than living alone and being independent of one another. The importance of cooperation and mutual respect became obvious.

As a matter of fact, this scientific spirit led to the emergence of deism which is the belief that God has created the universe and let it work by its own.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/alexander-pope>

In fact, deists are those who do not believe in god 's interference in man's life. In light of this fact , it is worth emphasizing that the Enlightenment ¹²was then an era during which the church felt insecure because of the spread of deism. That is the reason why the Bible became no longer the source of inspiration for people who became interested in political life more than any period before . Moreover, with the passing of time, political views on the philosophy of government gradually emerged. Despite their differences, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, became the most influential political theorists in the world¹³. Their ideas and philosophies spread all over the world influencing the creation of many new governments. In fact, they could set forth the basis of republicanism that would be adopted as the official political system of the independent United States.

It is worth noting that the belief in natural rights made of egalitarianism and freedom the primary concerns of the era, Consequently, people started to be aware that changing the political system is a must to achieve the natural right of equality. As a matter of fact, due to the transatlantic circulation of ideology, those radical ideas did not find difficulty to creep to the American mind which was looking for a change and innovation especially when Puritanism as a philosophy of life was waning and people ceased to take everything for granted in an age depending on reason for the interpretation of everything.

Since they suffered from monarchy and its injustice, the Americans displayed the desire and the willingness to fight against its perpetuation. To reach their goal , the Americans needed a philosophy that would help them establish a regime that would be different from the then prevailing monarchical system in that it should protect the individuals' natural rights .They learnt from

12 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deism>

13 Video: *Jonathan Israel and Philipp Blom Discuss Radical Enlightenment*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Y4M8w8B3FM>. Accessed June 5, 2013.

Old World philosophers especially from Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau theories on human nature and on how men should govern themselves.

Broadly speaking, the Americans had to depend on different and various philosophical trends in order to be able to finally form their own philosophy of life which would be embodied in the principle of republicanism. It is therefore, important to search in the roots of republicanism as an integral part of the American philosophy of life and as one of the prevailing radical ideologies from which all the appeals of freedom, justice, equality, and democracy were inspired.

What is certain is that in their construction of their political and social thought, the American founding fathers, who were highly intellectual, borrowed from the Old World's thought and ideologies .In a more important sense, they were not aloof from the then prevailing philosophical ideas that revolutionized the European mind and public opinion during the Age of Reason and then the Enlightenment. It seems clear that the Americans, in a way or another, were influenced by the radical ideas that circulated during the radical Enlightenment. Among the thinkers whose philosophy contributed to shaping the American radical ideology, we can mention Thomas Hobbes, James Harrington, John Locke, and Rousseau.

Assuredly ,many thinkers , politicians, and even writers have influenced the founding fathers' thoughts and ideas. Voltaire¹⁴, along with Locke and Rousseau, wrote books dealing with social injustice, religious superstition, and ignorance by which they could challenge the unjust systems in the Old

14 Voltaire is a French radical who was persecuted by the French authorities because of his revolutionary ideas and his hostility to all that hindered the fulfillment of man's freedom in France .In fact ,it is widely agreed among scholars that Voltaire's ideas about the freedom of speech had a great impact on the American founding fathers who stressed this democratic principle .Voltaire's famous saying is "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it" Burdette Kinne, *Voltaire Never Said it!* Modern Language Notes ,Vol. 58, No. 7 (Nov., 1943), pp. 534-535.

World that were all based on the myth of the king's divine right.¹⁵ The ideas of those thinkers and others had a major impact on those who wrote the Declaration of Independence and later the American constitution. Confessing the impact of the Enlightenment philosophers on him and on the founding fathers, in fact, Jefferson declares:

I will put off till my return from America all of them except Bacon, Locke, and Newton, whose pictures I will trouble you to have copied for me: and as I consider them as the three greatest men that have ever lived, without any exception, and as having laid the foundation of those superstructures which have been raised in the Physical and Moral sciences, I would wish to form them into a knot on the same canvas, that they may not be confounded at all with the herd of other great men...¹⁶

What is noticeable is that these words by Jefferson, which significantly and straightforwardly demonstrate the European philosophical presence in the American radical attitude, can be sufficient proof that the American elite were aware of the intellectual change that was brought by the radical Enlightenment. This therefore, can be an interesting starting point for demonstrating that the founding fathers were not only aware of the ideological change in the Old World but deeply influenced by the Enlightenment philosophers thanks to whom a new and a sound conception of government was born.

Revolution in Beliefs

The Revolutionary Period was characterized by:

15 2012 Annual Meeting: Session 134: *Radical Enlightenment: A Session in Honor of Margaret Jacob*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXh7fHfDL9U>. Accessed June 15, 2013.

16 Jefferson to Trumbull, Paris, February 15, 1789.

1. Faith in natural goodness - a human is born without taint or sin; the concept of tabula rasa or blank slate.
2. Perfectibility of a human being - it is possible to improve situations of birth, economy, society, and religion.
3. The sovereignty of reason - echoes of Rene Descartes' cogito ergo sum or I think, therefore, I am (as the first certitude in resolving universal doubt.)
4. Universal benevolence - the attitude of helping everyone.
5. Outdated social institutions cause unsociable behaviour - religious, social, economic, and political institutions, which have not modernized, force individuals into unacceptable behaviour.

II. The Characteristics of the Literature of the Period

1. Optimism - experiments in utopian communities
2. Sense of a person's duty to succeed.
3. Constant search of the self - emphasis on individualism in: a. personal religion. b. study of the Bible for personal interpretation.
4. A searching inquiry in all aspects of the world around.
5. Interest in the classics as well as in the Bible.
6. Interest in nature - the "absentee landlord" phenomenon.
7. Interest in science and scientific experiments.¹⁷

Most literature of the period was described as nonfiction or informative literature, which means it was based on fact rather than being made up by the author's imagination. The literature of this period was realistic. Its aims were to instruct, to enlighten, and to make people think. These people believed reason shows

¹⁷ <http://americanlit215.weebly.com/colonial-and-revolutionary.html>

life as it is; whereas, the imagination shows life as people wish it were or fear it may be. The people of the Enlightenment revered the power of the mind to reason and to determine realities. They deprecated passions and emotions. They saw reason as the ruling principle of life and the key to progress and perfection. This was an optimistic, self-confident period of time in Europe.¹⁸

- There is a stable, coherent, and knowable self. This self is conscious, rational, autonomous, and universal—no physical conditions or differences substantially affect how this self operates.
- This self knows itself and the world through reason, or rationality, posited as the highest form of mental functioning, and the only objective form.
- The mode of knowing produced by the objective rational self is “science,” which can provide universal truths about the world, regardless of the individual status of the knower.
- Reason is the ultimate judge of what is true, and therefore of what is right, and what is good (what is legal and what is ethical). Freedom consists of obedience to the laws that conform to the knowledge discovered by reason.
- In a world governed by reason, the true will always be the same as the good and the right (and the beautiful); there can be no conflict between what is true and what is right (etc.).
- Science thus stands as the paradigm for any and all socially useful forms of knowledge. Science is neutral and objective; scientists, those who produce scientific knowledge through their unbiased rational capacities, must be free to follow the laws of reason, and not be motivated by other concerns (such as money or power).
- The knowledge produced by science is “truth,” and is eternal.

¹⁸ https://pamwmurphy.weebly.com/.../the_enlightenment_or_age_of_reason

- The knowledge/truth produced by science (by the rational objective knowing self) will always lead toward progress and perfection. All human institutions and practices can be analyzed by science (reason/objectivity) and improved.¹⁹

Broadly speaking, the Americans had to depend on different and various philosophical trends in order to be able to finally form their own philosophy of life which would be embodied in the principle of republicanism. It is therefore, important to search in the roots of republicanism as an integral part of the American philosophy of life and as one of the prevailing radical ideologies from which all the appeals of freedom, justice, equality, and democracy were inspired.

What is certain is that in their construction of their political and social thought, the American founding fathers, who were highly intellectual, have borrowed from the Old World's thought and ideologies. In a more important sense, they were not aloof from the then prevailing philosophical ideas that revolutionized the European mind and public opinion during the age of reason and then the Enlightenment. It seems clear that the Americans, in a way or another, were influenced by the radical ideas that circulated during the radical Enlightenment. Among the thinkers whose philosophy contributed to shaping the American radical ideology, we can mention Thomas Hobbes, James Harrington, John Locke, and Rousseau.

It is worth emphasizing that the Enlightenment was then an era during which the church felt insecure because of the spread of deism. That is the reason why the Bible became no longer the source of inspiration for people who became interested in political life more than any period before. Egalitarianism

¹⁹ <https://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/postmodernism/modules/introduction.html>

started to be a central issue during the era, and people started to be aware that changing the political system is a must to achieve the natural right of equality. Because of the transatlantic circulation of ideology, those radical ideas did not find difficulty to creep to the American mind which was looking for a change and innovation especially when Puritanism as a philosophy of life was waning and people ceased to take everything for granted in an age depending on reason for the interpretation of every thing.

Since they suffered from monarchy and its injustice, the Americans displayed the desire and the willingness to fight against its perpetuation. To reach their goal, the Americans needed a philosophy that would help them establish a regime that would be different from the then prevailing monarchical system in that it should protect the individuals' natural rights. They learnt from Old World philosophers especially from Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau theories on human nature and on how men should govern themselves.

With the passing of time, political views on the philosophy of government gradually changed. Despite their differences, Hobbes and Rousseau, both became two of the most influential political theorists in the world²⁰. Their ideas and philosophies spread all over the world influencing the creation of many new governments. And they could set forth the basis of republicanism that would be adopted as the official political system of the independent United States.

There is no denying that many thinkers and politicians have influenced the founding fathers' thoughts and ideas. Voltaire, along with Locke and Rousseau, wrote books dealing with social injustice, religious superstition, and ignorance by which they could challenge the unjust systems in the Old World

²⁰ Video: *Jonathan Israel and Philipp Blom Discuss Radical Enlightenment*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Y4M8w8B3FM>. Accessed June 5, 2013.

that were all based on the myth of the king's divine right.²¹ The ideas of those thinkers and others had a major impact on those who wrote the Declaration of Independence and later the American constitution. Confessing the impact of the Enlightenment philosophers on him and on the founding fathers, in fact, Jefferson declares:

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1- Thomas Paine's literature

It is agreed among the historians of the colonial period that no person of the American Revolution is more associated with the history of American

21 2012 Annual Meeting: Session 134: *Radical Enlightenment: A Session in Honor of Margaret Jacob*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXh7fHfDL9U>. Accessed June 15, 2013.

22 Jefferson to Trumbull, Paris, February 15, 1789.

radicalism, or “reflects more clearly its complex intellectual roots, than Thomas Paine²³”. In fact, Paine won fame as the author of *Common Sense*, the famous pamphlet that implied the first call for American independence .About the tight link between Paine and the American radical thought John Karitansky notes:

The importance of Paine's writing for us today can be indicated with reasonable precision by describing him as the American radical. In other words it is as if Paine is attempting to demonstrate what sort of radicalism is consistent with American principles and even why what is really fundamental about America is radical .²⁴

Important is the idea that Paine's radicalism might be the result of his deist convictions. Indeed, Paine was known to be a deist. His deism, it needs to be stressed, probably sprung from his Quaker origins. Despite the fact that the Quakers were not deists, according to Paine, they were “the nearest religious group to true deism in the moral part”.²⁵ In essence, Deism as an a religious ideology “stands for the rejection of the tyranny of the priest and his word over the ordinary man and it was the priesthood that for long had provided the strongest support to monarchical despotism”.²⁶

It is quite interesting in this regard to observe that in his writings, Paine really succeeded in expressing every theme which would be tightly linked to the nineteenth-century radical tradition²⁷. This enabled him to be one of the major sources from which the Americans were provided with strong ideas concerning utopian political and social reform or radicalism. The founding fathers might

23 Eric Foner, "Radical Individualism in America: Revolution to Civil War" *Literature of liberty: A Review of Contemporary Liberal Thought* , vol. 1, no. 3 July/September 1978

<http://www.oll.libertyfund.org>. Accessed July 12, 2015.

24 Bryan-Paul Frost, Jeffrey Sikkenga, *History of American Political Thought*, "Tomas Paine ,The American Radical" ,chapter 3(Lexington Books,. 2003),p. 63.

25 Jason Edward op.cit., p.121.

26 Ibid.

27 See Cf .Bailyn,*The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*.

have adopted Paine's belief that the best republic is the one established on the basis of a constitution which obtains the consent of all the members of society.

In addition to this, Paine insisted that “it is the duty of the state to effectively uphold the rights of citizens including the right to a minimum standard of wealth and social security.”²⁸ However, one cannot fail to notice that through Paine’s text, there is a clear “sense of urgency and millennialism that does indeed reflect utopianism”²⁹ and even universalism. For instance, in justifying the call of independence ,he considers the geographical distance between the New World and Britain as part of a divine plan³⁰. In *Common Sense* ,he notes:

Even the distance at which the Almighty hath placed England and America, is a strong and natural proof, that the authority of the one, over the other, was never the design of Heaven. The time likewise at which the continent was discovered, adds weight to the argument, and the manner in which it was peopled increases the force of it. The reformation was preceded by the discovery of America, as if the Almighty graciously meant to open a sanctuary to the persecuted in future years, when home should afford neither friendship nor safety³¹.

Obviously this millennial belief might explain his stiff opposition to monarchy and his advocacy of republicanism. By this , Paine could really initiate to the American mind the new revolutionary thought that the new nation should cut all ties with the mother country . At this point , it must be

28 Jason Edward op.cit., p.121.

29 Ibid.

30 Elise Marienstras, *Les mythes fondateurs de nation américaine*,(Paris ,1976).p.75.

31 *Common Sense*"Works,p.23-24.

important confirm that Paine was the radical who could build the American political identity.

1.3-America in the Literature of Paine

Indeed, Paine could skillfully articulate the strong argument of the American Revolution and the complete rejection of the Old World .In other words, he was the one who could convince the American people of the possibility of creating a better society in the New World, a society that would be happier and more just than the one left behind .

It is also noticeable that taken from another perspective, *Common Sense*, as a political document, not only called for the American independence, but bitterly criticized and denounced the inequality and corruption which characterized the Old World as well. One can observe that in it, there is a direct criticism and even rejection of all kinds of power such as monarchy, artificial aristocracy, and hereditary privilege. In other words ,Paine ,probably, wanted his text be a strong basis for an authentic departure from the then prevailing traditional social and political norms . "We have it in our power to begin the world over again," he wrote; "The birthday of a new world is at hand."³².One can understand from this that he sought to institute a universal radical thought by which humanity would be emancipated from all kinds of power and subjection. It is obvious here that for Paine, the American War of Independence was just a step towards a universal revolt that would mark the beginning of a new history of humanity. ³³In this regard ,he notes:

The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind. Many circumstances have, and will arise, which are not local, but universal, and through

³² Steve Berges,*Charters of Liberty: The Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and the Bill of Rights*(American Liberty Press, 2010), p. 102.

³³ Elise Mariastrass,op.cit.108.

which the principles of all Lovers of Mankind are affected, and in the Event of which, their Affections are interested. The laying of a Country desolate with Fire and Sword, declaring War against the natural rights of all Mankind, and extirpating the Defenders thereof from the Face of the Earth, is the Concern of every Man to whom Nature hath given the Power of feeling; of which Class, regardless of Party Censure, is

³⁴

Most significantly, one can observe that Paine succeeded to a great extent in giving a universal dimension to the Revolution as a radical action. One can observe too that his universal revolutionary ideas aimed at transforming the American struggle for liberty from a mere struggle over the rights of Englishmen, into a universal revolt to free all mankind in the entire world from all types of tyranny and unjust rule. In this context, Arieli observes that Paine's vision of America "could only be created by a man who knew Europe well enough to hate its society and who longed desperately enough for salvation to visualize the destiny of the New World as liberation from the Old."³⁵

It is also worth stressing that this strong belief in the necessity of altering or overthrowing the monarchical system was also the fundamental theme and the central issue discussed in his *The Rights of Man*. Written as a reaction to the British statesman ,Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), this book argued that France should have reformed its existing government instead of undergoing a revolutionary upheaval. Paine who was a member in the French assembly saw the French Revolution as an opportunity to establish a new European government that should be democratic exactly as it happened in the United States.

34 Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*

35 Philip .S.Foner,ed., *The Life and the Major Writings of Thomas Paine* (Secaucus,NJ:Citadel Press,1948), p. 46.

Still, in his *The Rights of Man*, Paine affirms that the more perfect a society becomes, the less government is needed to protect the rights to which each individual is naturally entitled. In fact, he seems to consider government responsible for the plight of the citizens:

If we look back to the riots and tumults, which at various times have happened in England, we shall find, that they did not proceed from the want of a government, but that government was itself the generating cause; instead of consolidating society it divided it; it deprived it of its natural cohesion, and engendered discontents and disorders, which otherwise would not have existed.³⁶

Properly understood, these words by Paine implies his total rejection of the European political systems. They express a clear condemnation of all governments and all kinds of authority. Perhaps, this was the reason why the radical Paine has sometimes been claimed as the father of the nineteenth-century anarchism³⁷.

1.4- American Future in Paine's Writings

Moreover, Paine's political intelligence and maturity allowed him even to speculate the future of American democracy. This obviously appears in the last lines of *Common Sense*, in which Paine insists that the crown should be replaced by the new nation's charter of laws. This is how he puts it:

Let a day be solemnly set apart for proclaiming the charter; let it be brought forth placed on the divine law,

36 Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man*, in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Life and the Major Writings of Thomas Paine* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1948), p. 358.

37 Bryan-Paul Frost, Jeffrey Sikkenga, op.cit. p.63.

the word of God; let a crown be placed thereon, by which the world may know [that so far as we approve of monarchy], that in America, THE LAW IS KING. For as in absolute governments the king is law, so in free countries the law ought to be king; and there ought to be no other.³⁸

2.1- The Declaration of Independence :The Eloquent Paper of State

When drafting the Declaration of Independence ,the founding fathers, Jefferson being one of them , wanted it to be expressive of the new nation's nature and ambitions .That is why Jefferson had to justify the originality of the document .In other words ,as a paper of a state ,the Declaration of Independence ought to be original. About the primary purpose of the document, Jefferson notes:

[T]he object of “the Declaration” was [not] to find out new principles or new argument, never before thought of, not merely to say things that had never been said before; but to place to mankind the common sense of subject...Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied it from any particular and previous document or writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American man by his own admission.³⁹

One can understand ,thus, that Jefferson considers the Declaration as an expression of the American man .The founding fathers then sought to give the American individual a particular status in the future political system of the new nation. Without doubt, influenced by the radical Enlightenment, the founding

38 Thomas Paine , *Common Sense*, in Philip S.Foner,ed.,*The Life and the Major Writings of Thomas Paine* (Secaucus,NJ:Citadel Press,1948), p.290.

39 Ibid., p. 103.

elite were aware of the important fact that man cannot live correctly in his society without having his natural rights protected .This is the reason why Jefferson and his colleagues wanted the Declaration of Independence to be the classic statement of the American radical natural right philosophy. At this point ,it must be stressed that The Declaration of Independence is sufficient proof of the success of the perpetuation and consolidation of this legacy in America. In the Declaration, one can read:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness⁴⁰.

Obviously, the new nation's founding elite knew well that the natural rights theory was not a new theory .Probably ,this was the reason why they had to use the expression "self evident truths" .In fact, a self evident truth is more than a natural right .In other words ,the writers of the documents wanted to give the natural right philosophy an American touch . In addition to this, it is certain that The *Declaration's* claim that “whenever government injures these rights the people can alter or abolish it and institute a new Government” clearly addresses the goal of independence.

As said before, the American philosophy, as Jefferson wanted it to be, gives a great importance to the individual and his natural rights that is the reason why it teaches that since man is endowed at birth with rights which are unalienable because they are given by his Creator, the government must have as a primary concern the protection of these rights .In other words ,the government ,in Jefferson's belief, is a server and not a master. In line with this, Jefferson adds:

40 The Declaration of Independence.

The prime purpose of government is to protect the rights of the individual. For the first time, it is the society that is paramount, and the success of government is to be measured not by how well society is regulated, but by how free the individual is free from the government.⁴¹

One can consider this Jeffersonian governmental philosophy as uniquely American. It is worth mentioning that the concept of Man's rights being unalienable is based solely upon the belief in their Divine origin since ,to use Jefferson's words, "they are endowed by their Creator"⁴². Because those God-given rights are the gift of God, man has no right to alienate or surrender them. This is the real meaning of *unalienable* as used by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence.

In fact, there is a need ,here, to refer to the important fact that Jefferson's strong radical belief in man's natural rights, birthright freedom being one of them, made him show contempt for slavery as a social institution in the new nation . Because it is a kind of violation of the individual's natural right of self owning , Jefferson viewed it as a “moral depravity”⁴³.He also repeatedly insisted that maintaining slavery inside the American society was like holding “a wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go.”⁴⁴ But despite Jefferson's firm conviction that slavery ought to be ended ,one can observe that in the Declaration of Independence ,Jefferson did not make it clear whether "man" includes the barks or not .

As regards the link between Jefferson and Locke, one might easily observe that Jefferson’s remarkable achievement was adding to Locke’s theory

41 Ibid.

42 The Declaration of Independence.

43 Bear, James A., Jr. *Jefferson at Monticello*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1967.

44 Jefferson to John Holmes, April 22, 1820, *The Thomas Jefferson Papers*, Special Collections,(University of Virginia Library) Transcription available at Founders Online

of human rights the principle that the progress of an elite or a group of people in society should be based on natural ability and talent rather than on class privilege or wealth. In other words, Jefferson was, like Paine, a believer in natural aristocracy. It is this very principle that later became one of the ideals of American democracy. What is interesting is that from this ideal spring the two fundamental themes of the American War of Independence. The first was the primacy of individual freedom as a natural right: 'The God, who gave us life, gave us liberty at the same time.'⁴⁵ Secondly, and more importantly, popular sovereignty a principle that Jefferson always defended: "From the nature of things, every society must at all times possess within itself the sovereign powers of legislation."⁴⁶.

More adequately, as concerns Jefferson's ideology, it is widely held among scholars that there is a quite clear and intelligent linking between popular sovereignty and liberty. But what is interesting is that both are deeply rooted in the American divine plan, and further legitimized by ancient practice and the Anglo-Saxon tradition⁴⁷. At this point, it must be stressed that Jefferson's celebration of the American pastoral and his desire to establish a society different from the British one led him to show contempt to "the city, industrialisation, and commerce"⁴⁸ which characterized the mercantile Old World. All that gave the American colonists a remarkably solid, clear, and unique, conceptual basis for their radical attitude of fighting the War of Independence. This leads me to open the discussion of Jefferson's reasonable and persuasive arguments for the American radical theory of empire that ignited the tension between the nation and the mother country.

45 Ronald J. Pestritto, Thomas G. West, *The American Founding and the Social Compact* (Lexington Books, 2003), p. 110.

46 Thomas Jefferson, *Memoirs, Correspondence and Private Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Late President of the United States*, Volume 1, p. 116.

Colburn and Bentley, 1829 [https://www.books.google.fr/books?id,\(1858\)](https://www.books.google.fr/books?id,(1858)), p. 96.

47 See Elise Marienstras, *Les mythes fondateurs de nation américaine*, (Paris: 1976), p. 81-85.

48 Ibid, p. 85.

American Romanticism :the First Seeds of American Nationalism and the Birth of American Novel : Michel Crevecoeur, Washington Irving ,and James Fennimore Cooper

As pointed out before, the puritans who immigrated to the newly settled land ,had always believed that they were the chosen people who had left Britain in order to settle in the promised land; the latter that was the appropriate place for establishing a godly and a utopian society. This belief was deeply rooted in the minds of the puritan settlers and was, in fact ,a solid background for the American project of having a completely independent identity from any other part of the world .Winthrop the governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony has always insisted on the belief that America was the promised and the Americans were the chosen people so they their nation should be a city on the hill all people should look upon them .This extremely positive ,optimistic and ambitious belief has always been behind the American feeling of national pride

and became one of the fundamental causes of the American endless search for international leadership .

1- Michel Crevecoeur

Concerning literature ,there is a need to clarify that literary calls for intellectual and cultural detachment from the mother country had been heard far long before the calls of political independence were heard .Perhaps, one of those who first discussed and wrote about the uniqueness of the American way of life and personality was Michel Crevecoeur. This French man who immigrated to the newly settled land .Having suffered from the confining feudal system and the monopoly of land by the landed gentry in the old world, it was easy for him to notice the difference between the agrarian life in the old world and the one in the new world .In his *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crevecoeur insisted that land possession in America is possible for all Americans who work it .This agrarian theory marked a real departure from the Old World's agrarian system as it put the basis for the belief that the newly settled land is a garden .In this line, Crevecoeur affirms :

It [America] is not composed, as in Europe, of great lords who possess everything and of a herd of people who have nothing. Here are no aristocratic families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastic dominion, no invisible power giving to very visible one; no great manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury. The rich and poor are not as far removed from each other as in Europe. (Crevecoeur,2008 ,431)

Interesting , however is the idea that Crevecoeur was among the first writers to criticise the Old World and to sow contempt to life in Europe .Moreover ,he went beyond that to describe the upper class there as

manipulating and ruling over the poor, while he considered America as a new society with a vacuum that will be filled with equality, tolerance, and freedom. One can understand from the passage above that, according to him, the poor in Europe had no freedom because they had to farm the lands of their feudal overlords, without being able to keep anything for themselves.

As regards the uniqueness of the American personality, Crèvecoeur insisted that the American character was far from being British or European, but rather it is the result of a mixture of blood that gave a completely new race. The American for Crèvecoeur is of a new origin; it is a hybrid race. This hybridity that gave uniqueness to the American man is the result of America being a melting pot. In line with this he explicates :

What then is the American, this new man? He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He has become an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all races are melted into a new race of man, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims .
(Ibid., 123)

From the foregoing analysis, it seems obvious that Crèvecoeur had a firm belief that in America, however, immigrants could use the cultural and intellectual tools they brought from Europe while serving their masters to create their own freedom. This new American principle is based on the individual's self-interested ownership of land and its resources. He puts the idea as follows :

The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions. . . . Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. . . . An immigrant when he first arrives . . . no sooner breathes our air than he forms new schemes, and embarks in designs he never would have thought of in his own country. . . . He begins to feel the effects of a sort of resurrection; hitherto he had not lived, but simply vegetated; he now feels himself a man . . . Judge what an alteration there must arise in the mind and thoughts of this man; . . . his heart involuntarily swells and glows; this first swell inspires him with those new thoughts which constitute an American. (Ibid.)

2-Washington Irving

For his part ,Washington Irving thoroughly felt the necessity of getting the American literary and cultural independence. In his attempt to contribute to this national mission he tended in his literary productions to depend on purely American ideas and myths that are directly linked to the American setting and environment .In addition to that ,he deliberately used some German folklore and cultural ideas in an attempt to strengthen Crèvecoeur's theory of America being a melting pot .The reader of *Rip Van Winkle* ,for instance ; the short story written by Irving , can easily feel the variety of the American culture; as he can perceive the versatile nature of the American people . He writes :

His historical researches, however, did not lie so much among books as among men; for the former are lamentably scanty on his favorite topics; whereas he found the old burghers, and still more their wives, rich in that legendary lore, so invaluable to true

history. Whenever, therefore, he happened upon a genuine Dutch family, snugly shut up in its low-roofed farmhouse, under a spreading sycamore, he looked upon it as a little clasped volume of black-letter,' and studied it with the zeal of a book-worm. (Irving , 1994, 1-2)

There is no denying that the reader of the story often finds himself far from the traditional British context and cultural scene ;he rather finds himself in totally different culture in an American setting :

His mind now misgave him; he began to doubt whether both he and the world around him were not bewitched. Surely this was his native village which he had left but the day before. There stood the Kaatskill mountains--there ran the silver Hudson at a distance--there was every hill and dale precisely as it had always ken--Rip was sorely perplexed—‘That flagon last night,’ thought he, ‘has addled my poor head sadly! ("Ibid.)

3-James Fennimore Cooper

For his part, James Fennimore Cooper went in his search for the uniqueness of the American identity to insisting on the Indian culture in the American life. In unprecedented attempt to draw the reader's attention to the cultural differences that could intermingle in the American society ,Cooper saw that the quest for an American unique and independent identity would not be successful without introducing the Indian culture and people in his literary works as an integral part of the American life and as one of the important American cultural elements that might strengthen the difference between the American society and the British one . “The pale-faces are masters of the earth,

and the time of the red-men has not yet come again.”Tamenund, the Delaware patriarch, speaking at the end of the novel .⁴⁹

In addition to this ,one cannot fail to notice that in his masterpiece *The Last of the Mohicans*, Cooper emphasises the hybrid nature of the American society through referring to the possible mixture between the Indian blood and the American one. This appears in his using of a hybrid character " Cooper also renounced racism against the Indians ."and throughout the novel, he tended to use statements that serve this goal . For instance , one can read : "There is reason in an Indian, though nature has made him with a red-skin!"Hawkeye speaking to Chingachgook.⁵⁰

Interesting is the idea that Cooper’s work was the first work that draw attention to the Indian presence in the American cultural scene .This legacy was for Cooper one of the most important arguments of the uniqueness of the American identity.It is worth noting that Cooper was the first American man of letters to attack racism and to call for the fair treatment of the natives in America . This radical attitude is quite obvious in his *The Last of the Mohicans* : “Should we distrust the man because his manners are not our manners, and that his skin is dark?”Cora speaking of Magua. ⁵¹

Despite all the previously discussed literary achievements in the American literary life ,Sidney Smith, a British critic once wrote “the Americans literature have none” those words by Smith was so humiliating and insulting not only to the American men of letters but to all the American people .Literature is part of culture and the culture is a direct reflection of the nation’s identity to deny the existence of an American literature was to deny the existence of an

49 (Cooper, Chapter XXXIII).

50 (Ibid.,Chapter III).

51 (Ibid.,Chapter I).

American identity .This was the reason why the Americans had to respond to Smith. Literary speaking ,they had to stop imitating the British way o f writings and to adopt a completely new ideas ,styles ,and even themes.

1-The Emergence of Transcendentalism and its prominent writers

Transcendentalism was a movement for religious renewal, literary innovation, and social transformation. Its ideas were grounded in the claim that divine truth could be known intuitively. Based in New England and existing in various forms from the 1830s to the 1880s, transcendentalism is usually considered the principal expression of romanticism in America. Many prominent ministers, reformers, and writers of the era were associated with it, including Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), Margaret Fuller (1810–1850), Theodore Parker (1810–1860), Bronson Alcott (1799–1888), and Orestes Brownson (1803–1876). But it is worth mentioning that transcendentalism was and still is difficult to categorize since it could be viewed as a spiritual, philosophical, and cultural movement. Emerson himself provided a fairly open definition in his 1842 essay “The Transcendentalist”:

The Transcendentalist adopts the whole connection of spiritual doctrine. He believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy. He wishes that the spiritual principle should be suffered to demonstrate itself to the end, in all possible applications to the state of man.⁵²

52 Ralf Emerson «The Transcendentalist”. See RWE.org - *The Complete Guide to the Life and Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. See also *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*: English traits (Harvard 1994).

Various organizations and periodicals gave the movement shape. The earliest was the so-called "Transcendental Club" (1836–1840), an informal group that met to discuss intellectual and religious topics; also important was the "Saturday Club," organized much later (1854). Many transcendentalists participated in the utopian communities of Brook Farm (1841–1848; located in West Roxbury, Massachusetts), founded by George Ripley (1802–1880) and his wife, Sophia Dana Ripley (1803–1861), and the short-lived Fruitlands (1843–1844; located in Harvard, Massachusetts), founded by Alcott. A number of transcendentalist ministers established experimental churches to give their religious ideas institutional form. The most important of these churches were three in Boston: Orestes Brownson's Society for Christian Union and Progress (1836–1841); the Church of the Disciples (founded 1841), pastored by James Freeman Clarke (1810–1888); and Theodore Parker's Twenty-Eighth Congregational Society (founded 1845–1846). The most famous transcendentalist magazine was the *Dial* (1840–1844), edited by Fuller and then by Emerson; other major periodicals associated with the movement included the *Boston Quarterly Review* (1838–1842), edited by Brownson, and the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* (1847–1850), edited by Parker.

Transcendentalism emerged from Unitarianism, or "liberal Christianity"—an anti-Calvinist, anti-Trinitarian, anticreedal offshoot of Puritanism that had taken hold among the middle and upper classes of eastern Massachusetts. The founders of transcendentalism were Unitarian intellectuals who came of age, or became Unitarians, in the 1820s and 1830s. From Unitarianism the transcendentalists took a concern for self-culture, a sense of moral seriousness, a neo-Platonic concept of piety, a tendency toward individualism, a belief in the importance of literature, and an interest in moral reform. They looked to certain Unitarians as mentors, especially the great Boston preacher William Ellery

Channing. Yet transcendentalists came to reject key aspects of the Unitarian worldview, starting with their rational, historical Christian apologetic.

The Unitarian apologetic took as its starting point the thesis of the British philosopher John Locke that all knowledge, including religious knowledge, was based on sense data. The Unitarians were not strict Lockean; under the influence of the Scottish "Common Sense" philosophers, notably Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart, they held that some fundamental knowledge could be known intuitively—for example, that certain things were morally right and wrong, and that the world that human senses perceive in fact exists. Nonetheless, Unitarians held that only "objective" evidence could prove Jesus had delivered an authoritative revelation from God. They believed they had found such evidence in the testimony, provided in the Gospels, of Jesus' miracles. The Unitarians valued the historical study of Gospel accounts, in order to prove them "genuine" and therefore credible.

Transcendentalists rejected as "sensual" and "materialistic" Unitarianism's Lockean assumptions about the mind, and were inspired instead by German philosophical idealism. Its seminal figure, Immanuel Kant, argued that sense data were structured by the mind according to certain "transcendental" categories (such as space, time, and cause and effect), which did not inhere in the data, but in the mind itself. The transcendentalists liked the Kantian approach, which gave the mind, not matter, ultimate control over the shape of human experience. The name of their movement was derived from Kant's philosophical term. Yet the transcendentalists, unlike Kant but like other Romantics (and, to an extent, the Common Sense philosophers), held that religious knowledge itself could be intuitively known. According to this view, people could tell "subjectively" that Jesus had given a revelation from God, because his doctrine was self-evidently true and his life self-evidently good.

The transcendentalist apologetic turned out to have radical implications. Because transcendentalists believed religious truth could be known naturally, like any other truth, they tended to reject the idea of miraculous inspiration as unnecessary and to dismiss as false the claim made for the Bible that it had unique miraculous authority. Transcendentalists still respected Jesus, but the more radical of them, like Emerson in his Divinity School Address (1838), and Parker in *Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity* (1841), attacked the miracle stories in the Gospels as pious myths. Such attacks were highly controversial; theologically conservative Unitarians accused the transcendentalists of being infidels and atheists. Meanwhile, the transcendentalists began to see religious value in sacred writings beyond the Bible, including those of Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims. The transcendentalists became pioneers in the American study of comparative religion.

Another implication of intuitionism had to do with the role of the artist. The transcendentalists believed all human inspiration, whether biblical or not, drew from the same divine source. They did not hold religious inspiration to be mundane, like artistic and intellectual inspiration; rather, they held that artistic and intellectual inspiration, like religious inspiration, were divine. The artist, in particular the poet, gained new importance to the transcendentalists as a potential prophet figure, and poetry as a potential source of divine revelation. Emerson was being characteristically transcendentalist when in his first book, *Nature* (1836), he sought to achieve wholly honest, beautiful, and original forms of expression. In his address "American Scholar" (1837), meanwhile, he called on American writers to stop imitating foreign models; actually, the transcendentalists promoted American interest in foreign Romantic writers, especially Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832).

2.The Values and tenets of Transcendentalism and its impact on American Literature

In the nineteenth century, the American radicals continued to foster social change through what can be described as “transcendentalist radicalism”. The latter is an American philosophical movement that emphasized the importance of the individual and was a break from the formalized religion. It flourished from roughly the mid-1830s to the 1860s, and was often viewed as a move toward the spiritual, and thus a real departure from the increasing materialism of American society at the time. As a philosophy, it emphasizes idealism rather than materialism.

It is worth mentioning that transcendentalism was and still is difficult to categorize since it could be viewed as a spiritual, philosophical, and cultural movement. Emerson himself provided a fairly open definition in his 1842 essay “The Transcendentalist”:

The Transcendentalist adopts the whole connection of spiritual doctrine. He believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy. He wishes that the spiritual principle should be suffered to demonstrate itself to the end, in all possible applications to the state of man.⁵³

As has already been pointed out the movement cannot be considered radical unless it works to free the generations from the past traditions that might hinder the freedom of the individual. Transcendentalism, as a radical movement,

53 Ralf Emerson «The Transcendentalist». See RWE.org - *The Complete Guide to the Life and Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. See also *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: English traits* (Harvard 1994).

cannot be properly understood outside the context of Unitarianism, the dominant religion in Boston during the early nineteenth century.

3.1-The Historical and Religious Context of Transcendentalism

Unitarianism had developed during the late eighteenth century as a liberal branch of Christianity which had been separated from Orthodox Christianity during the First Great Awakening of the 1740s. That Awakening age centered on the questions of divine election and original sin, and saw a brief period of revivalism. Unitarians focused mainly on stability, rational thought, progressive morality, classical learning, and other distinctive features of Enlightenment Christianity instead of the basic principles of Calvinism. Transcendentalism then as a movement is deeply rooted in the American religious history. Their insistence on intuition reminds us of the Puritan and the Quaker "doctrine of divine light." However, this concept assumes acts of God, whereas intuition is an act of an individual.

In light of this ,one can understand that the roots of the Transcendentalists' religious philosophy go back to the American religious history. In exploring their radical departures from Calvinism, one can assume that the Transcendentalists took their radical ideas from some radical branches of American Puritanism. What is certain then is that, in shaping their radical thought, they took a lot of reformist ideas from the Calvinist religious dimensions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Broadly speaking, the Transcendentalist movement took a more radical approach to the issue of the divinity of the natural world than the Unitarian church held. In addition to that, it totally rejected the tenets of empiricism, as put forth by Enlightenment thinkers, such as John Locke and David Hume. That is the reason why their radical philosophy is often interpreted as a reaction to the

materialism and rationalism of the 18th. In fact, it can be considered as a model of the general Humanitarian thought of 19th century thought. This opposition to materialism and the confining religious doctrines one of which being the traditional concept of the original sin might explain the special importance attributed by the Transcendentalists to intuition, spirit, and the individual. In explaining the nature of the Transcendentalist humanitarian thought, Francis E Skipp observes that:

The Transcendentalists rejected materialism with its emphasis on facts, history, the force of circumstance and the animal wants of man"... they adopted a utopian vision of humans as able to transcend all that by means of the God-given spiritual powers of the human mind.⁵⁴

By holding that "finding God depended neither on orthodox Puritanism nor on the Unitarians' sensible exercise of virtue, but on the individual's inner striving toward spiritual communion with the divine spirit"⁵⁵, the transcendentalists not only wanted to reform religion but to reform all the aspects of life; one of which was the political one.

Perhaps, one of the major transcendentalists' political productions was "Civil Disobedience" , an essay written by Henry David Thoreau in which he analyzes the individual's relationship to the state and focuses more on why should men obey governmental law when they believe it to be unjust? In fact,

54 Francis E Skipp, *American Literature*, Barron's Educational Series, Inc., New York, the USA., 1992), p. 92-93.

55 Mahbub Murad "About American Transcendentalism "
<http://mahbubmurad.blog.com/2011/10/07/about-american-transcendentalism/>. Accessed July 08, 2015.

the importance of this document lies in that it could summarize the transcendentalists' radical attitude and clarify their conception of the state.

Henry David Thoreau ,the transcendentalist

Henry David Thoreau, (born July 12, 1817, Concord, Massachusetts, U.S.—died May 6, 1862, Concord), American **essayist**, poet, and practical philosopher, renowned for having lived the doctrines of **Transcendentalism** as recorded in his masterwork, *Walden* (1854), and for having been a vigorous advocate of civil liberties, as evidenced in the **essay** “Civil Disobedience” (1849).

Thoreau was born in 1817 in Concord, Massachusetts. Though his family moved the following year, they returned in 1823. Even when he grew ambivalent about the village after reaching manhood, it remained his world, for he never grew ambivalent about its lovely setting of woodlands, streams, and meadows. Little distinguished his family. He was the third child of a feckless small businessman named John Thoreau and his bustling, talkative wife, Cynthia Dunbar Thoreau. His parents sent him in 1828 to Concord Academy, where he impressed his teachers and so was permitted to prepare for college. Upon graduating from the academy, he entered Harvard University in 1833⁵⁶ There he was a good student, but he was indifferent to the rank system and preferred to use the school library for his own purposes. Graduating in the middle ranks of the class of 1837, Thoreau searched for a teaching job and secured one at his old grammar school in Concord. But he was no disciplinarian, and he resigned after two shaky weeks, after which he worked for his father in the family pencil-making business. In June 1838 he started a small school with

⁵⁶ http://www.thedailyinspirations.com/documents/henry_david_thoreau.html

the help of his brother John. Despite its progressive nature, it lasted for three years, until John fell ill.⁵⁷

A canoe trip that he and John took along the Concord and Merrimack rivers in 1839 confirmed in him the opinion that he ought to be not a schoolmaster but a poet of nature. As the 1840s began, Thoreau took up the profession of poet. He struggled to stay in it and succeeded throughout the decade, only to falter in the 1850s.

Thoreau: Emerson's Student

Thoreau was highly influenced by the essayist and poet **Ralph Waldo Emerson**, who had settled in Concord during Thoreau's sophomore year at Harvard. By the autumn of 1837, they were becoming friends. Emerson sensed in Thoreau a true disciple—that is, one with so much Emersonian self-reliance that he would still be his own man. Thoreau saw in Emerson a guide, a father, and a friend.

With his magnetism Emerson attracted others to Concord. Out of their heady speculations and **affirmatives** came **New England Transcendentalism**. In retrospect it was one of the most significant **literary movements** of 19th-century **America**, with at least two authors of world stature, Thoreau and Emerson, to its credit. Essentially it combined romanticism with reform. It celebrated the individual rather than the masses, emotion rather than reason, nature rather than man. Transcendentalism conceded that there were two ways of knowing, through the senses and through **intuition**, but asserted that intuition **transcended** tuition. Similarly, the movement acknowledged that matter and spirit both existed. It claimed, however, that the reality of spirit transcended

⁵⁷ Ibid.

the reality of matter. Transcendentalism strove for reform yet insisted that reform begin with the individual, not the group or organization.⁵⁸

Thoreau 's Major Works

The most significant and enduring works by Thoreau are listed here in order of original publication; when he made substantial revisions, especially in the essays, the volumes in which the revised versions first appeared are likewise noted:

Walden Pond

Back in Concord Thoreau rejoined his family's business, making pencils and grinding **graphite**. By early 1845 he felt more restless than ever, until he decided to take up an idea of a Harvard classmate who had once built a waterside hut in which one could loaf or read. In the spring Thoreau picked a spot by Walden Pond, a small glacial lake located 2 miles (3 km) south of Concord on land Emerson owned.⁵⁹

⁵⁸Britannica Educational Publishing, *Authors of the 19th Century* ,p.244.

⁵⁹ Ibid.