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### Transcendentalism Project

My project can be found online at [engl-project.ddns.net](http://engl-project.ddns.net) . Please do note that since I'm not using weebly or another similar resource, I have to manually manage the hosting of my project. As such, if you could put my grade in Canvas as soon as possible after you've evaluated my project, just so that I can stop worrying about the server, that'd be great. In case you experience some sort of strange technical issue with my project, I've included as much as I can below. Please keep in mind that there might be some odd non sequiturs, as this cannot include the interactive content I have on the site. This summary can be found online as well at [engl-project.ddns.net/project.pdf](http://engl-project.ddns.net/project.pdf) .

Transcendentalism is, at its core, about how one experiences the world. Transcendentalist ideology posits that the mind creates experiences; the mind itself is a lens through which we view the world. Rather than being a blank tablet that the world molds, each individual person's experiences are shaped by innate factors. Despite this, Transcendentalism holds that divinity does exist, but is within everything: nature, the works of man, and man itself.

Much of the work of the Transcendentalists is designed to explain this relationship between the divine and man, as well as show how experiences are shaped by individuals. Transcendentalism hinges upon the idea that the mind itself has some innate perspective, and this perspective acts upon how individuals experience the world, as opposed to the mind being a *tabula rasa*, or "blank slate," which is impressed wholly by experiences. In other words, in the classic question of whether the mind is formed by nature or nurture, Transcendentalism firmly answers nature (Goodman).

This idea is based in the work of Immanuel Kant; he called this idea the, "Copernican Revolution in philosophy" (Goodman). To reject the empiricist movement's idea of the *tabula rasa*, he used what he called *transcendental arguments*. For example, Kant rejected the *tabula rasa* by claiming that one can only experience the world under a framework provided by the mind. "It must be the mind's structuring, Kant argues, that makes experience possible" ("Immanuel Kant: Metaphysics"); therefore, the mind cannot be entirely based upon experiences, as having a consciousness is a prerequisite of having experiences in the first place.

This influence shaped much of Transcendentalist thought, specifically their ideas that truth and divinity could be uncovered through individual experience. Because experience is

shaped through the mind, and consciousness itself is divine, they asserted that individual experience would help attain a connection to this universal truth and divinity.

One simple example of how our minds alter our experience is looking at how our brains mask our eye's blind spot. To demonstrate:

- 1) Hold your right thumb out at arm's length.
- 2) Put the tip of your thumb directly beneath the dot on your screen.
- 3) Close your left eye.
- 4) Slowly move your arm to the right, keeping your eye on the dot.

After you move your arm about twenty degrees off of center, you should notice that your thumb has disappeared. Notably, your mind just fills this blind spot with whatever color surrounds it, meaning that you don't often notice the blind spot at all. While this example is fairly trivial, it showcases a simple, yet very subtle way your mind falsifies information and how your mind can and does change what you experience.

Returning to the Transcendentalists, it is important to note that the Transcendentalists felt that people had abandoned their connection with nature and individual experience. Indeed, Emerson writes that, “we are now so far from the road to truth, that religious teachers dispute and hate each other, and speculative men are esteemed unsound and frivolous” (Emerson 215).

Much of Transcendentalist writing seems to focus on solving this problem, with Emerson's *Nature* attempting to take its reader on a journey to inquire, “to what end is nature?” (Emerson 215). As Transcendental philosophy hinges on the idea of individual experience, the writings produced by this movement are often experiences in themselves, rather than prescriptive guides on living life, which would run counter to many of the movement's ideals. In order to

better understand how Transcendentalist writers achieved this goal, let's examine some passages by prominent Transcendentalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson.

“If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these preachers of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile” (Emerson 215).

Here, Emerson contrasts how people tend to devalue the common, and how beauty imparts an intrinsic value. He begins by writing that if the stars appeared only once per millenium, “men [would] believe and adore.” The comparison here is implicit; because most people do not often marvel at the stars, mostly due to them appearing each night, Emerson creates a world where the stars do not appear each night. In this world, one would view the stars at their actual value rather than overlooking them because they appear every night. Since Emerson's goal is to convince people to "reconnect" with nature, reminding them of the beauty of the stars helps people reevaluate their detachment from the beauty around them.

Emerson goes on to personify the stars themselves, saying that they are, “preachers of beauty,” and that they have an, “admonishing smile.” This personification helps to subtly reemphasize Emerson’s message of “connecting” with nature rather than looking at it as a static object. Additionally, characterizing the stars as, “preachers,” helps to reassert the semi-deification of nature that is central to Transcendental philosophy.

Personally, this passage really made me think about how I frequently overlook the beautiful things around me. I honestly think that reading this passage has helped to make me a more thoughtful person, one who better keeps in mind that which is around me. To help

demonstrate, this next slide is the view I walk past to get to my car each morning; after reading this passage, I realized that I'd been overlooking the beauty of this short walk down my driveway each morning, simply because I did it every day. Be sure to drag with your mouse to have a look around! (Please note: the next slide may take a moment to load, as the image is about 9.2MB in size).

Beyond writing about how we should respect nature for its beauty, Emerson also wrote that nature provides a connection between itself and our emotions. Emerson wrote, "Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance, ... [and] it is not words only that are emblematic; it is things which are emblematic. ... Thus is nature an interpreter, by whose means man converses with his fellow men" (Emerson 223-224).

In order to help explain what Emerson has wrote, I'd like to introduce a small puzzle. It's very simple, just click the button whose color corresponds to the color of the text. For example, if you were to see **green**, you'd click the button colored red. After you are done, just press spacebar to continue.

Like before, this game helps to act as a simple example of what Emerson explained in his passage. When nature is acting as an, "interpreter," it conjures images in the mind of the audience. The game highlights this image by creating confusion, as the color in one's mind, which is created by the word, does not match the color of the text on one's screen.

However, as Emerson notes, this game represents an incomplete example, as, "it is not words only that are emblematic; it is things which are emblematic." While more complicated, the idea of, "things," being emblematic is built on the same principle as words. Just as the lines that

make up the word “red” do not have any inherent meaning, yet they create the idea of red in your mind, Emerson claims that the “things” themselves, “have no value” (224) on their own, but when they are connected to an idea or a person, they gain a meaning separate from the literal one. This is what makes nature valuable as an interpreter; it allows one to simply and succinctly conjure complex ideas in the minds of an audience. Just as it would be near impossible to describe red without the word “red,” many ideas such as nuanced, “subtle spite” (Emerson 223), would be difficult to accurately communicate without the connection to the natural “thing” that is a snake.

Being able to connect with an audience is a skill set that I try to practice everyday. As a speech and debate competitor, being able to clearly communicate my ideas is crucial. Additionally, I’d like to go into software development after I graduate, and user interface can make or break your app. Good design is often about being able to communicate the function of something quickly and seamlessly, and one of the ways this happens is by making your design similar to something your user will already be familiar with. As such, being able to competently model your designs off of nature can be a huge asset, because the experience of nature is one that is truly universal.

## Works Cited

- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Nature." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, edited by Robert Levine and Arnold Krupat, 8th ed., vol. B, W. W. Norton & Co., 2012, pp. 214-243.
- Goodman, Russell, "Transcendentalism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2018 Edition)*, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, edited by Edward N. Zalta, [plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/transcendentalism](http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/transcendentalism). Accessed Feb. 15, 2019.
- "Immanuel Kant: Metaphysics" *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, University of Tennessee, Martin, [www.iep.utm.edu/kantmeta](http://www.iep.utm.edu/kantmeta). Accessed Feb. 15, 2019.