

ISSN 0976-8165



# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Quarterly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

April 2013 Vol. 4 Issue- II

**Editor-in-Chief**

**Dr. Vishwanath Bite**

**Managing Editor**

**Madhuri Bite**

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)  
[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

## **A Comparative Study of Wordsworth's *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* and Emerson's *Rhodora***

**Hussein Salimian Rizi**

University of Semnan,  
Semnan, Iran.

**&**

**Pycaam Abbasi**

Assistant professor,  
Dept. of English,  
Faculty of Foreign Languages,  
University of Isfahan,  
Hezar Jerib street, Isfahan,  
Iran.

### **Abstract**

American Transcendentalism and English Romanticism, though faraway from each other, were quite concurrent and experienced various social and political changes the chief of which was, in many writers' view, the corruption of society and subsequently of man. Therefore, nature replaced man and society as the central entity, after which her beauty, solitude and intuition, the happiness and pleasure extracted from solitude, and non-conformity ensued as thematic elements in both movements. The Romantic William Wordsworth and the Transcendental Ralph Waldo Emerson imbue their literary works with such elements. This paper is an attempt to show that Emerson's poem "The Rhodora: On Being Asked, Whence Is the Flower?" (1847) shares certain thematic elements with Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (1897).

**Key Words:** American Transcendentalism; English Romanticism; Nature; Beauty; Solitude; Pleasure; Non-conformity.

### **I. Introduction**

Romanticism as "a profound and irreversible transformation in artistic styles, in cultural attitudes, and in the relations between artist and society in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century" seems by a large amount to be cast in the same mould as many of the Transcendentalist notions pertaining to nature and beauty, human's happiness, non-conformity and for the most part solitude and intuition (Drabble 872). Romanticism and Transcendentalism, dubbed as the American Renaissance, reacted against the genuinely intellectual realism, objective reasoning, and barren religious dogma. In other words, they came out as pilgrimages from the idolatrous world of creeds and rituals to the temple of the Living God in the soul. American Transcendental intellectuals met informally for "philosophical discussion at Emerson's house and elsewhere during some years from 1836, the embodiment of a movement of thought, philosophical, religious, social, and economic, produced in New England between 1830 and 1850 by the spirit of revolutionary Europe, German philosophy, and Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Carlyle" (Ibid. 1025). Therefore, it is expected from both English Romanticism and American Transcendentalism to have several premises in common, which are going to be delved into in this paper.

In its connection with American Literature, "transcendentalism designates a belief that the visible world, observed by an *intuitive imagination*, offers endless clues and hints about the invisible world whose truths stand eternally behind the physical facts perceived by the five senses" (Skipp 28). The turning point marked by Wordsworth's "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" located the ultimate source of poetry in the individual artist, rendering art not so much as a mirror to reflect the external world, but the illumination of the world within. In Emerson's *Essays*, placed in the *Self-Reliance* section, the very scrupulously-etched-out perception comes out: "No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferred to this or that; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it" (Emerson 48).

Apropos of Transcendental position and the inherent goodness of man, Romantics painstakingly spell out the corruptibility of man; yet through reason and feeling, or in Coleridge's words "Intellectual Intuition," man applies imagination to reconcile the opposites and to exceed the corrupted society to study nature as a work of art constructed by a divine imagination; in that case "calm is all nature as a resting wheel" imbued with a system of symbols (Wordsworth 968). In reality, the two poets' penchant for nature is "desire for a return to the simplicity after a century of intellectuality" (Spurr 173). We need to bear in mind that the imagination meant here differs from pure fancy and recollected memories, but the "secondary imagination" functioning as an echo of the "primary imagination" which is "the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (Rhys 159). Such imagination "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate: or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify" (Ibid.). In fact one of the characteristics of the Romantic Movement is "its enduring engagement with the natural world" made possible through the freedom of imagination (Ferber 413).

Though exceeding Romantics, Emerson brought to light each man's intrinsic grandeur and dignity, believing "he [man] should see that he can live all history in his own person [...] not suffer himself to be bullied by kings or empires, but know that he is greater than all the geography and all the government of the world" (Emerson, *Essays* 11). In one or another sense, a macabre Romantic-like perspective of society comes as a revelation to Emerson: "society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self reliance is its aversion" (Ibid. 47). Yet he comprehends "that Unity; that Over-soul, within which everyman's particular being is contained and made one with all other" and the fact that "we live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE" (Ibid. 239). Subsequently if the immersion in nature seems necessary, the engagement with the society is indispensable. Essentially in Wordsworth's late-1790s poetry, the poet sees nature as a "guarantee of the essential goodness and benignity of the material universe" (O'Neill and Mahoney xxiv).

Drawn as a conclusion from the aforementioned antagonism towards the joint-stock-company-like society, solitude crops up in the wake of non-conformity. In *Self-Reliance* Emerson notifies us that "when the devout motions of the soul come, yield to them heart and soul" even if this yielding commits a breach in your past (*Essays* 53); or it gives rise to inconsistency since "with consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do" (Ibid.); thus "whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist" (Ibid. 47). Such reckless and spirited nonconformity would beyond doubt call forth solitude and eminent seclusion. Such a sort of nonconformity comes up in the Romantics while not quite all of them sympathized with the

French Revolution, and William Wordsworth, as the quintessence of the Romantics, went to the stake for the revolutionaries.

The embodiment of nonconformity becomes known in children who, unfettered by social rituals and rules, experience life from their own hearts. Emerson avers in his *Essays* that a child "cumbers himself never consequences, about interests; he gives an independent, genuine, verdict" but, alas, "man is as it were clapped into jail by his consciousness" (46). Emerson's contemporary, William Wordsworth, "also associates childhood with unfettered imagination, primary feeling, and the possibility of union with the expansive world of nature" (O' Dwyer 103). On a par with Emerson's description, being "clapped into jail" is echoed in Wordsworth's *Ode on Intimations of Immortality* (1807), which sheds light on their fairly unified stream of thought: "Shades of the prison house begin to close / Upon the growing Boy" (Wordsworth 588). In that case it would seem explicable that "the Child is father of the Man" and Wordsworth would wish his days to be "bound each to each by natural piety" (Ibid. 79).

For both Transcendentalists and Romantics, solitude was endowed with insightful observation gleaning the Truth from deep down the heart of nature as created by the Divine Creator and defamiliarizing the unseen, hence in Coleridge's poem *Frost at Midnight* (1798) "Only that film, which fluttered on the grate, / Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing" (Coleridge, *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 221). In the seventh part of *Nature-Prospects*- Emerson claims that "but each of us must continue the good work of restoring the unity by becoming unified with himself again, by gaining wisdom through prayer, by recognizing the miraculous in common and everyday phenomena and events" (qtd. in Gale 87). Such a sense of health and integrity latent in the natural life, contrary to the depredations wrought by humanity, is forthrightly given a tribute in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) in the poem *Lines Written In Early Spring* (1798): "I heard a thousand blended notes, / While in a grove I sate reclined, / In that sweet mode when pleasant thoughts / Bring sad thoughts to the mind [...] If this belief from heaven be sent, / If such be Nature's holy plan, / Have I not reason to lament / What man has made of man?" (ll. 1-4 , 21-24 482). In the wake of loneliness, joviality and pleasure ensue and sweeten the loneliness. As Emerson put it frankly in his own words: "I chide society, I embrace solitude" (Emerson, *Essays* 173) as for a great man "who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" (Ibid. 50).

Although American Transcendentalism has "strong connections with English, European, and Oriental philosophy, its native roots are to be found in the Quaker "inner light," the Puritan "divine and supernatural light," and in the secular egalitarianism fostered by the American Revolution" (Skipp 28). Even though far flung from each other in terms of geography, English Romanticism and American Transcendentalism seem well-matched in a number of principles, including Nature and her beauty, the happiness and pleasure extracted from solitude, and non-conformity. Emerson as the father of American Transcendentalism and William Wordsworth as an effectual and prolific initiator in English Romanticism encompass the same themes here and there in their works. This paper is an attempt to show that Emerson's poem *The Rhodora: On Being Asked, Whence Is the Flower?* (1847) shares certain thematic elements with Wordsworth's poem *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* (1897).

## II. Nature and her beauty

The two poems are lyrical and the lyricism makes much space for natural imagery. Natural images, which suggest sublimity, noticeably infuse the two poems: in *Rhodora*, with the first line being imbued with natural images of May and sea-winds, the same as *I Wandered Lonely*

as a *Cloud* which embraces cloud in the first line, nature calls our attention. In both poems, the first lines display the lyrical speakers' empathy with nature: "In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes, / I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods" (ll. 1-2). The phrase "our solitudes" seemingly intertwines the speaker, who is actually the poet himself, with nature; so as for Wordsworth's poem: "I wandered lonely as a cloud / That floats on high o'er vales and hills" (ll. 1-2), wherein the poet intuitively unites with a cloud. Likewise, Rhodora's beauty triggers the poet's imagination that awakens perceiving the unity between man and nature. However, it is worth our attention that some critics have laid superfluous emphasis on the natural images as symbols of eternal truth, while beauty by itself was important for the poets, that is, each of the images (rhodora, cloud, daffodils, etc.) indicates beauty and truth of life.

Rhodora, the "rival of the rose," is so transcendently charged with "charm" that "its leafless blooms in a damp nook" can "please the desert and the sluggish brook" and "the purple petals fallen in the pool / Made the black water with their beauty gay" (ll. 4-6). In Wordsworth's poem, such lyricism in diction emerges when a host of golden daffodils "Beside the lake, beneath the trees, / Fluttering and dancing in the breeze," despite the waves dancing beside them, "Outdid the sparkling waves in glee." Rhodora and daffodils are so humble and meek that they care no bit of residing on the earth next to the sluggish brook and leave the poets thunderstruck by endowing them with "the wealth" of the show. Rhodora "cheapens his array" by letting the red bird "court" him and for the worse, in sages' eyes, his "charm is wasted on the earth and sky."

The personification of these natural creatures indeed elevates them highly beyond purely lifeless objects into supremely divine creatures. After a while "For oft, when on my couch I lie / In vacant or in pensive mood, / They flash upon that inward eye," which is manifest of daffodils' imagery, no longer commonplace flowers, being gleaned from the spontaneous overflow of the poet's feelings recollected in tranquility, tickling his imagination. Similarly, the lake in Emerson's poem stands higher than a run-of-the-mill object, but an animate one which reflects not only the outside world- the sky- but also the poet's mind reflecting upon itself and nature.

As mentioned above, in Romantic and Transcendental perspectives of nature and human being, nature stands highly genuine compared with man and his corrupt society. However, through bonding with nature, man manages to step beyond corruption to retreat his human nature by means of intuition. Many critics have referred to Wordsworth's "progression from nature worship or even pantheism to a highly qualified form of natural religion, with increasing awareness of the 'ennobling interchange' between mind and nature" (Natarajan 73). Emerson impressively interweaves with nature when his solitude seems dissolved in that of nature as "In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes, / I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods" (ll. 1-2). Furthermore the last couplet unequivocally addresses Rhodora for being of a kind alike: "But in my simple ignorance suppose / The self-same power that brought me there, brought you" (ll. 15-16). Such credible coalescence with nature surfaces in the first two lines of Wordsworth's poem: "I wandered lonely as a cloud / That floats on high o'er vales and hills," as if the speaker is lyrically an inseparable part of nature.

Alongside nature's spiritual divinity and otherworldliness, the natural tangible beauty comes no less important, since "a nobler want of man is served by nature, namely, the love of Beauty" (Emerson, *Nature* 19). In the two poems the Rhodora and daffodils as representatives of nature emotionally overwhelm the speakers leaving them speechless about their beauty to such an extent that in reply to "sages" regarding the reason of beauty, Emerson heatedly credits it merely with "Being" beautiful for the sake of eyes: "Rhodora! If sages ask

thee why / This charm is wasted on the earth and sky, / Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing, / Then beauty is its own excuse for Being" (ll. 9-12). Wordsworth, transported by the beautiful daffodils, sees nothing for a while but those which are "Continuous as the stars that shine / And twinkle on the milky way, / They stretched in never-ending line / Along the margin of a bay: / Ten thousand saw I at a glance, / Tossing their heads in sprightly dance" (ll. 7-12). In such a cheerful company, lost for words, he "gazed—and gazed—but little thought / What beauty the show to me had brought" (ll. 17-18). As wordless as Wordsworth, Emerson also never ventures to even think to ask "Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose" (l. 13).

### III. Solitude, non-conformity and pleasure

"Nourished by Protestant conceptions of intellectual liberty, the Romantic writers tended to cast themselves as prophetic voices crying in the wilderness, disclosed from the social hierarchy. The Romantic author, unlike the more socially integrated Augustan writers, was a sort of modern hermit or exile" (Drabble 872). Romanticism and Transcendentalism embrace loneliness and solitude which are apostrophized by some poets, asking for their companionship in the course of life, which is plainly exemplified in Keats' sonnet VII (1816): "O Solitude! If I with thee dwell, / Let it not be among the jumbled heap / Of murky buildings; climb with me the steep" (De Selincourt 34). Such loneliness and solitude unconsciously tangle the poet with nature and distance him/her from the society and masses; hence phrases such as "our solitudes" in Emerson's poem and "lonely as a cloud, vacant or in pensive mood, the bliss of solitude" in that of Wordsworth are set as key signifiers in analyzing their poems. Primarily Emerson's oneness with nature tickles our fancy with the poet coalescing his and nature's solitudes being pierced: "In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes" (l. 1).

With the sages querying the reason of "this charm" being "wasted on the earth and sky" (l. 10), the poet merely turns to his unswerving and persistent belief that "beauty is its own excuse for Being" (l. 12), and eventually that "The self-same power that brought me there, brought you" closes his decisive credence to nature and his solitariness in nature. In truth, the way Emerson contends against the sages and their rationalism, plus his complete disregard for them, who stand possibly as symbols of the whole society, indistinctly proves his non-conformity in the society. On the other hand the poet decides to leave the "sages" and link himself with natural beauty. He seems utterly disinterested about the public idea regarding him as he frankly uses the phrase "in my simple ignorance," which could be read paradoxically; one reading sheds light on the speaker's ignorance about the purpose of Rhodora, or that the sages know nothing, yet his ignorance is simple and negligible. Therefore, as stated in Emerson's *Nature*, "the only way a man can be truly alone is to get away from society and also from books, and to commune with an aspect of nature" (qtd, in Gale 80).

Wordsworth's poem brims over with solitude and its implications as well. The first stanza masterfully juxtaposes the lonely cloud, i.e. the speaker, "that floats on high o'er vales and hills" (l. 2) with "a crowd, / A host of golden daffodils; / Beside the lake, beneath the trees" (ll. 3-5), which are also "Continuous as the stars that shine / And twinkle on the milky way, / They stretched in never-ending line" (ll. 7-9). The image of the daffodils' exuberance and other natural objects' abundance contiguous to the cloud's loneliness, though sprightly and glad, underpins his pleasant solitude immersed in nature. Moreover, all of these separate objects- cloud, daffodils, trees, stars, and waves- were brought up with the self-same power uniting them into oneness, represented as nature then.

In his *Essays*, Emerson, under the discussion of nature's sweet and bitter sides, asserts that "punishment is a fruit that unsuspected ripens within the flower of the pleasure which concealed it" (1892, p. 93) and wholesome pleasure is taken out of pleasant things "as soon as we seek to separate them [the sweet and bitter sides] from the whole" (Ibid. 95), since "life invests itself with inevitable conditions, which the unwise seek to dodge" (Ibid.). Having said that, Emerson deems a pleasure "mixed with awe" arising as the difference between man and nature is suggested; though "in a higher manner, the poet communicates the same pleasure. By a few strokes he delineates, as on air, the sun, the mountain, the camp, the city, the hero, the maiden, not different from what we know them, but only lifted from the ground and afloat before the eye" (Emerson, *Nature* 64).

The poet fluidly impresses himself on nature, thus the "ten thousand" daffodils "flash upon that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude; / And then my heart with pleasure fills, / And dances with the daffodils" (ll. 21-24). Metaphorically speaking, the dance and "the motion of the flowers is definitely likened to a human activity" (Wolosky 32) which takes place inside the poet. Wolosky believes that in Wordsworth's poem, the "images [attribute] human traits to the natural world" (Ibid.). She also believes "the dance" to be "a dance of the heart," then she states that "the poet sees himself in nature; and then he sees nature in himself" (Ibid. 33). In a similar sense, Emerson, who is now an inseparable part of nature, observes Rhodora "Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook, / To please the desert and the sluggish brook" (ll. 3-4). He partakes in their pleasure as he notices "The purple petals fallen in the pool / Made the black water with their beauty gay" (ll. 5-6). Both Wordsworth and Emerson come to bear a very close resemblance to nature and bond heartily with it.

#### IV. Conclusion

English Romanticism and American Transcendentalism- nowhere near one another in terms of geography yet almost concurrently existing- were undergoing tumultuous and epoch-making periods of time in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Analogous social and historical circumstances put the two movements on a par with particular thematic elements, including nature and her beauty, the happiness and pleasure extracted from solitude, and non-conformity. Principally the prevailing corruption running through the course of societies secluded many intellectuals but lit the shelter of nature to be taken, followed by wanted or unwanted solitude and nonconformity. However, the solitude gleaned from nature bestowed a wealth of pleasure upon quite a lot of writers and intellectuals, in particular upon William Wordsworth and Ralph Waldo Emerson, though it is noteworthy that Wordsworth is "a writer sympathetic to others and deeply concerned with social, historical and political questions" (O'Neill and Mahoney 74). The poems- "The Rhodora: On Being Asked, Whence Is the Flower?" by Emerson and "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" by Wordsworth- take place inside the poets and bestow epiphany upon them with their poems functioning as interior journey. They both encompass certain major thematic elements when read between the lines. Natural images, signs of solitude, and the pleasure emanated from them make the two poems suitable for a comparative study.

#### Works Cited:

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria*. Ed. Ernest Rhys. New York: Everyman's Library, 1930.

..... . *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907.

- De Selincourt, E. (Ed.). *The Poems of John Keats*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1905.
- Drabble, Margaret. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Emerson, R.W. *Essays*. Philadelphia: Henry Altemus, 1892.
- ..... *Nature*. Boston: James Munroe & Co, 1836.
- Ferber, Michael. (Ed.). *A Comparison of European Romanticism*. Cornell: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005.
- Gale, Robert. *Ralph Waldo Emerson and Transcendentalism*. New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc, 1966.
- Natarajan, Uttara. (Ed.). *The Romantic Poets: A Guide To Criticism*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007.
- O'Dwyer, Kathleen. "Emerson's Argument for Self-reliance as a Significant Factor in a Flourishing Life", *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, 2(1), 102-110, 2012.
- O'Neill, Michael. and Mahoney, Charles. (Eds.). *Romantic Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.
- Skipp, Francis E. *American Literature*. New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc, 1992.
- Spur, Barry. *Studying Poetry*. Sydney: The University of Sydney, 1997.
- Wolosky, Shira. *The Art of Poetry: How to Read a Poem*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Wordsworth, William. *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*. Hutchinson, Thomas. (Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939.