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Introduction

Within every human resides an immortal soul which is united with all other creatures, nature and God. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and the Transcendentalists dedicated their lives to the cultivation of their individual souls and the liberation of humanity from the confines of the oppressive institutions of society. They protested a reliance on history and tradition as the basis for religion, advocating an original experience of nature and the divine as having greater value. Faith and reason are found within every individual and the cultivation of both allows each person to attain his or her highest potential as a human. If every individual reaches this potential, humanity will finally be capable of creating a perfect society where every person is equal and respected. The Transcendentalists began this journey, and the current generation must continue their work in the hopes of one day achieving complete unity between the world and the divine.

This paper begins with a historical discussion of the Unitarian Church and the early biography of Ralph Waldo Emerson. I trace Emerson’s evolution from his career as a Unitarian minister to his call for the reform of the Church by examining various sermons, particularly “The Lord’s Supper” (1832). The ideas from these sermons serve as the foundation for Emerson’s contribution to the formation of the Transcendental movement, as is particularly evident in his book *Nature* (1836). Following this is an examination of Transcendentalism, where I provide information regarding the formation of the movement, the major figures and works, and its lasting impact. Finally, I discuss the application of Emerson’s ideas regarding the
importance of self-reliance, the cultivation of the intellect, and the divinity within every human soul, to Margaret Fuller’s work on behalf of woman’s rights. I examine Fuller’s contribution to the woman’s rights movement through her Boston Conversations and her essay “The Great Debate: Man versus Men. Woman versus Women” (1843).

**Emerson and the Unitarian Church**

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a preoccupation with the exploration and settlement of new territory characterized the spirit of America. The nation also suffered from tensions over slavery and other internal disagreements, as well as foreign pressure and threats (Sontag and Roth 67). Stirrings of unrest and desires for reform existed on the religious front in addition to the political. In 1815, the Unitarians formally separated from the Congregationalists due to disagreements regarding the Puritan portrayal of a tyrannical God and of human life as being predetermined (Buell xii). The Unitarian establishment still highly valued the New Testament and continued to extensively study it. Reverend William Ellery Channing, one of the Unitarians’ most prominent preachers, asserted: “We regard the Scriptures as the records of God’s successive revelations to mankind, and particularly of the last and most perfect revelation of his will by Jesus Christ. Whatever doctrines seem to us to be clearly taught in the Scriptures, we receive without reserve or exception” (qtd. in Dorrien 28). As Channing clearly stated, the Unitarians believed in the divine authority of the Bible as the record of
God's revelation. The Unitarians recognized Jesus as their master and, therefore, they were primarily concerned with discerning and preaching the New Testament. Channing’s Unitarianism differed from Puritanism and Calvinism in its emphasis on humanism, individuality and the universality of enlightened reason (58). The Transcendentalists grew from the Unitarian Church, grasping these ideas of individualism and universality and expanding them.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born on May 25, 1803 to Ruth and William Emerson. His father was the Unitarian minister of the First Church of Boston whose death in 1811 left Ruth Emerson with limited means for caring for her family. William’s sister, Mary Moody Emerson, assisted Ruth with raising the children. In his biography entitled *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, Robert D. Richardson, Jr., describes Emerson’s childhood as being dominated “by and among women of notable intellectual and spiritual accomplishments” (22). Thanks to the influence of his Aunt Mary, Emerson entered the Boston Latin School in 1812 and went on to attend Harvard University in 1817. Emerson was characterized as an average student. He was awarded class poet, but only after the offer was declined by seven other students. In addition to this formal education, Richardson asserts that “the single most important part of Emerson’s education was that provided by his aunt” (23). Mary Moody Emerson maintained consistent correspondence with all the Emerson boys, but particularly favored Waldo. She strongly desired Emerson to enter the ministry and continue the tradition of the family.
After graduation, Emerson worked for a few years in various teaching positions throughout Boston while contemplating a more permanent career. As evidenced by his journals during this time, Emerson’s career choice was a difficult one. He had a strong desire to pursue a literary career as a poet and essayist. His first essay, “Thoughts on the Religion of the Middle Ages” was published in 1822 in the *Christian Disciple and Theological Review*. However, he constantly felt the pressure of his family to enter the ministry. His aunt repeatedly reminded him that four generations of his ancestors had been clergymen. Any hope for the continuation of this legacy now rested with Waldo, since both William and Edward had abandoned their studies of divinity in favor of careers in law (Richardson, *The Mind on Fire* 58). Despite his literary aspirations, in April of 1824, Emerson decided to study divinity. He related in a tone of resignation in his journal: “I deliberately dedicate my time, my talent, and my hopes to the Church” (qtd. in Richardson, *The Mind on Fire* 55). In 1825, Emerson entered Harvard Divinity School, which was run by the Unitarian Church under Channing’s guidance. Channing’s course in divinity involved the intense study of the Bible and Biblical scholarship. Emerson settled himself into the syllabus until his eyesight failed him a month later, forcing him to withdraw from the college (57-59).

As Emerson regained his sight, he dedicated his time to more literary pursuits, rather than resuming his exhaustive study of the Bible. His interaction with the writings of the skeptic Montaigne illustrated to Emerson the value of both idealism and sensualism as essential aspects of the human experience (Richardson,
The Mind on Fire 68). Already, Emerson’s ideas that would later form Transcendentalism were developing. This is clearly evident in Emerson’s first sermon in June of 1826, entitled “Pray without Ceasing.” In regards to history, he stated that the past “except as a means of wisdom is, in the nature of things, actually nothing.” He went on to say that “all that can be done for you is nothing to what you can do for yourself” (qtd. in Richardson, The Mind on Fire 69). Later that year, Emerson sent a letter to his aunt in which he asserted that “it is wrong to regard ourselves so much in a historical light as we do, putting time between God and us” (qtd. in Richardson, The Mind on Fire 71). As his writing and philosophy progressed through his life, Emerson fully developed his ideas regarding the need to free the mind from history and to maintain a strong reliance in the self.

In June of 1827, Emerson returned home and spent the summer preaching at the First Church in Boston. Richardson tellingly describes Emerson’s activities during this time as “writing sermons and preaching in his father’s city, in his father’s church, in his father’s faith” (The Mind on Fire 79). His sermons during this time were “surprisingly conventional” (80). As previously stated, Emerson began his career as a minister of the Unitarian Church with resignation rather than a sense of enthusiasm or inspiration. He greatly felt the pressures of his family and of carrying on the traditions of his ancestors. Emerson initially relinquished his aspirations for a literary career and put aside his passion for literature in order to satisfy these expectations. From his early childhood, he had been immersed into his father’s Unitarian beliefs, complimented by his mother’s Calvinism and his aunt’s
strong religious beliefs. Along with William and Edward, Waldo was molded to enter the ministry. Emerson rose to the task and excelled as a minister.

However, following this summer of successful preaching, Emerson began to feel an overwhelming draw to poetry. He strongly desired the freedom associated with a life of poetry, in which he could read whatever he chose and write with originality based on his personal feelings alone. At this time, the financial stability and the approval of his family and community retained a greater appeal. Signaling one of his first protests to these circumstances, Emerson asserted his rejection of technical biblical scholarship in a letter to his aunt. He stated that he refused to waste his life and recovered eyesight “weighing phrases and hunting in dictionaries” in order to ascertain the traditional interpretation of scripture (qtd. in Richardson, *The Mind on Fire* 82). He concluded this letter by proclaiming that “A portion of the truth ... bright and sublime, lives in every mind” (qtd. in Richardson, *The Mind on Fire* 82). He resolved to discover this truth and, through his sermons, to relate it to the teachings of the Unitarian Church.

At the end of 1827, Emerson met his first wife Ellen Tucker. Richardson describes Ellen as being attentive to nature and possessing a mind of her own, both of which were incredibly appealing to Emerson (*The Mind on Fire* 84). In January of 1829, Emerson became the junior pastor of the Second Church of Boston and was finally ordained in March. Later that year, he became pastor of the same church and married Ellen shortly after (84-88). In all of his writings, Emerson continued to assert his own independent thought and the value of his individuality and that of
all people. Emerson’s individualism was most profound in that he recognized that individuality does not necessarily obviate a sense of dependence. Despite his success at obtaining a lucrative position and marrying the love of his life, Emerson refused to take full credit for his circumstances. He confided in a letter to his Aunt Mary that he did not hesitate to assert a “frank acknowledgment of unbounded dependence” (qtd. in Richardson, *The Mind on Fire* 88). Throughout his explorations of the individual, Emerson never failed to acknowledge the existence of a greater power outside of the self. He eventually came to refer to this power as the oversoul, or the divine force that unifies all of humanity and nature.

Emerson’s success as a preacher continued to grow over the next few years. He rose to the status of a respected public figure representing faith and learning, despite the undeniable fact that Emerson had not yet solidified his own beliefs or sense of self (Richardson, *The Mind on Fire* 91). The progression of his journey and the beginnings of his separation from the Unitarian Church were evident in his sermons and other writings. Gary Dorrien, in his book entitled *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion*, stated that Emerson “declared in 1830 that ‘every man makes his own religion, his own God, his own charity.’ The root of religion is first-hand, he asserted emphatically; for the truly religious person, religion is not derived ‘from the Bible or his neighbor’” (61). Emerson defined God as “the most elevated conception of character that can be formed in the mind. It is the individual’s own soul carried out to perfection” (qtd. in Richardson, *The Mind on Fire* 97). Later in the year, Emerson asserted that “to
believe your own thought, that is genius” (qtd. in Richardson, *The Mind on Fire* 99). Emerson subverted patriarchy through his assertion that God is understood through individual experience, rather than traditional interpretations of scripture. With this statement, he began to separate himself from the Unitarian Church. The separation was furthered by Emerson’s proclamation that “it is only so far as you find Christianity within your own soul that I recommend it” (qtd. in Richardson, *The Mind on Fire* 99). Emerson’s refusal to abide by Christian doctrines that were contrary to his personal experience of the divine became his fundamental reason for leaving the ministry two years later.

In February of 1831, Ellen died of tuberculosis and Emerson’s religious faith was shaken. Ellen had been a deeply religious person, and Emerson associated her with “strong, self-effacing religious faith right from the start” (Richardson, *The Mind on Fire* 109). Consequently, Emerson suffered from a spiritual crisis after the loss of his wife. He recognized that he was “unstrung, debilitated by grief” (qtd. in Richardson, *The Mind on Fire* 110). However, he continued to fulfill his duties as a preacher and conducted a series of lectures on the Gospels that spring. His lectures were rather conventional, referencing respectable sources and offering a valid representation of the genuineness of the gospels. Privately, however, Emerson admitted that he did not see much value in the gospels in assisting the individual in leading a religious life. With the conclusion of these lectures, Emerson concluded his exploration of biblical studies (111-114). As a result of his discontinuation of
biblical research, Emerson’s sermons began to focus more clearly on the individual and the personal experience of the divine.

On July 17, 1831, Emerson delivered a sermon regarding discovering God in all of nature, both visible and invisible. This sermon very clearly demonstrated Emerson’s progression away from the doctrine of Unitarianism and the formation of his Transcendental beliefs. He stated that his current experience caused him to believe that he was witnessing “a very sensual state of the Church, when things are understood sensually, or by pictures addressed to the senses, and not spiritually” (Emerson, “Sermon CXXI” 65). He illustrated this point with a discussion of the perception of heaven. An unnamed Christian described heaven as full of pomp and splendor. Emerson pointed out that this image of heaven “gives no more pleasing or true result for the employment of human minds than that they are to utter commendation and anthems to a great king ... God and man are alike dishonoured by these representations” (65). Emerson argued that this representation of heaven fell short of the individual’s potential for spiritual fulfillment, even in this life. He went on to say that people should not place all of their faith in the afterlife, but should instead strive to find fulfillment and understanding in the present: “we sit and hope that our salvation will be wrought out for us, instead of working out our own” (67). As this quote shows, Emerson always favored activity over passive acceptance, and saw more value in the process, than the destination.

Later in 1831, Emerson noted that “in my study my faith is perfect ... My own mind is the direct revelation I have from God” (qtd. in Richardson, The Mind on
Fire 117). Emerson was discovering the extent to which God was experienced within the individual. In the passage above, he emphasized the importance of personal experience in gaining and maintaining an understanding of divinity and human nature. Despite his present grief over the loss of his beloved wife, it seems that this loss actually served as a catalyst to free him from the confines of his life as a minister. As a result of the suffering caused by his loss, Emerson explored the nature of death and, consequently, of life. His own experience of divinity proved to be exceedingly more powerful than anything he had studied or received from external sources. In February of 1832, he recorded in his journal his view of the purpose of study: “What can we see, read, acquire, but ourselves?” (qtd. in Richardson, The Mind on Fire 120). Emerson finally acknowledged that his life as a conventional Unitarian pastor was no longer granting meaning to his existence. As soon as he recognized this fact, he resolved to separate himself from the Church.

The Lord’s Supper (1832)

Emerson’s desire for this separation was publicly made known on October 28, 1832 through his sermon “The Lord’s Supper.” In this sermon, Emerson presented his belief that the traditional celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist was being conducted in error. He dedicated the first part of the sermon to an analysis of the gospels and other scriptures regarding the celebration of the sacrament. Emerson pointed out that neither Matthew nor John, both of whom were eyewitnesses of the original feast, made any reference to Jesus’ intention of the
feast becoming a permanent tradition. The gospel of Mark was also devoid of any such reference. Only Luke’s gospel contained an account of Jesus as desirous of the remembrance of the occasion. The Church granted authority to the practice based on the fact that the tradition was a continuation of the disciples’ mode of remembrance. Emerson conceded that the disciples’ celebration of the feast in memory of their friend was appropriate. However, this reasoning did not extend to the continuation of the feast for centuries. In his sermon, Emerson pointed out that “it was only too probable that among the half-converted Pagans and Jews, any rite, any form, would find favor, whilst yet unable to comprehend the spiritual character of Christianity” (The Complete Works). Here, Emerson hypothesized that the tradition began as a method of lending a sense of structure and stability to the newly reformed faith of the early Christians.

An error of the early Church to which Emerson also contributed the origins of this tradition was the belief that the second coming of Christ would happen soon, perhaps even within the lifetime of the disciples. In “The Lord’s Supper,” Emerson reported that the disciples were slow to realize “the idea which we receive, that his second coming was a spiritual kingdom, the dominion of his religion in the hearts of men, to be extended gradually over the whole world” (The Complete Works). Therefore, Emerson argued that to grant the practices of the primitive church a high degree of authority was risky. He stated that even if “it could be satisfactorily shown that they esteemed it authorized and to be transmitted forever, that does not settle the question for us” (The Complete Works). This revelation marks the
beginning of Emerson’s essential reason for leaving the Church. Richardson asserts that Emerson seized upon this disagreement about the sacrament in order to formally separate himself from the Unitarian Church. However, Richardson also points out that this separation did not signal any loss of faith on Emerson’s part (The Mind on Fire 125). In his sermon, Emerson made his reason for his separation unmistakably clear:

It is my own objection. This mode of commemorating Christ is not suitable to me. That is reason enough why I should abandon it. If I believed that it was enjoined by Jesus on his disciples, and that he even contemplated making permanent this mode of commemoration ... and yet, on trial it was disagreeable to my own feelings, I should not adopt it. I should choose other ways which, as more effectual upon me, he would approve more.

In reality, Emerson’s refusal to conduct the Last Supper was based solely upon the fact that this practice did not aid in his religious experience or strengthen his relationship with God.

Furthermore, Emerson stated that his discussion of the history and his analysis of the scriptures within this sermon were conducted merely to please his audience. He emphasized that his refusal to conduct the sacrament was not based on any lack of regard for Jesus, whom he loved as a friend. He was not arguing against forms in general, but was simply stating that as soon as such forms were no longer effective, they must be cast aside. Emerson stated that he preferred Christianity to all other doctrines because “it presents men with truths which are their own reason ... freedom is the essence of this faith” (The Complete Works). However, Emerson challenged Christianity by saying that its institutions should be
adaptable for the purpose of enhancing its members’ religious experiences. He went on to assert that, through its interpretation of scripture, the Church has overlooked the fact that Jesus and all the martyrs sacrificed themselves “to redeem us from a formal religion, and teach us to seek our well-being in the formation of the soul.” Jesus was sent to teach us to serve God with our hearts, instead of through sacrifices and idolatry. Emerson recognized that during his time, the Christian Church demanded that its members commemorate Jesus with a particular form, regardless of whether the individuals found the form agreeable or effective.

Emerson concluded his sermon by stating: “It is my desire, in the office of a Christian minister, to do nothing which I cannot do with my whole heart. Having said this, I have said all.” He went on to say that, while he reflected upon his time as a minister with a strong sense of unworthiness, he was “consoled by the hope that no change can deprive me of the satisfaction of pursuing and exercising its highest functions.” Throughout his life, Emerson continued to explore his individual relationship with divinity through his writings and conversations as a Transcendentalist. The ideas he presented in “The Lord’s Supper” regarding the importance of gaining an unmediated, personal understanding of the religious sentiment became central to his Transcendental explorations.

**Emerson the Transcendentalist**

Transcendentalism is considered the “first intellectual movement in the history of the still-new nation to achieve a lasting impact on American thought and
writing” (Buell xi). Following the War of 1812, America experienced a time of economic growth and increased national security. Intellectuals began examining the nation’s historical place in the world and solidifying the American sense of self. The election of Andrew Jackson as president in 1828 marked the first time a candidate won the presidency through a direct appeal to the masses. With his election, America entered an era characterized as “the rise of the common man” (Myerson xxxi). As the industrial revolution spread, the middle class emerged. The self-made man became a desirable status which could be achieved through hard work and a strong reliance upon the self rather than external forces (xxxii). Out of this new belief in self-reliance rose the Transcendentalist movement.

Most of the major Transcendentalists were from New England, and many were originally Unitarians. While described as the “movement’s single most defining figure” (Buell xiv), Ralph Waldo Emerson was certainly not the only influential intellectual to rise out of the movement. Henry David Thoreau wrote “Resistance to Civil Government (1849) and Walden (1854), which are the best known of the Transcendentalist writings. Margaret Fuller was an education reformer and feminist theorist. Her great work, Woman in the Nineteenth Century (1845) is considered the “nation’s first significant feminist manifesto” (Buell xiv). George Ripley left the Unitarian ministry in order to establish Brooke Farm (1841-1847), which was the most long-lasting of various Transcendental experiments in alternative living. Amos Bronson Alcott and Elizabeth Peabody both focused their energies on educational reform (xiii-xvi). In terms of defining the goals and beliefs
of the movement, the year 1836 saw many of the major manifestos published. These included Alcott’s *The Doctrine and Discipline of Human Culture* and Ripley’s *Discourses on the Philosophy of Religion*. The most widely read and enduringly influential work of the year, however, proved to be Emerson’s book *Nature* (Buell 31).

In the midst of the Transcendentalists’ attempts to publicly define their beliefs, Emerson’s personal experience of 1836 proved also to be rather eventful. As Richardson noted in his biography of Emerson, merely three months before the publication of *Nature*, Emerson’s youngest brother Charles died of tuberculosis. Charles was engaged to marry Elizabeth Hoar in September of that year, and the couple had been planning to move into Emerson and Lidian’s new house after their marriage. Charles’ death left Emerson once more stricken with grief (*The Mind on Fire* 224). In a letter to Lidian, Emerson confided his sensation that he had lost a part of himself with the death of his brother: “How much I saw through his eyes” (qtd. in Richardson, *The Mind on Fire* 224). Despite being deeply affected by Charles’ death, Emerson did not allow himself to fall down the slippery slope of grief into a desperate longing for days past. After abandoning a brief attempt to assemble Charles’ writings into one volume, Emerson resumed his task of writing *Nature* (225).

In fact, literary critic Harold Bloom attributed Emerson’s “refusal to mourn for the past” as the “secret cause of his strength” (*Modern Critical Views* 7). As previously discussed, Emerson spurned the Unitarian’s reliance on biblical texts
and ancient traditions in favor of the individual’s original experience of the divine. Bloom’s assertion highlighted Emerson’s application of this rejection of history to his own past. After both the loss of his wife and youngest brother, Emerson maintained a persistent focus on the present, instead of passing his days in contemplation of the past. Several years later, in his 1844 essay “Experience,” Emerson considered the transient effect the loss of a loved one had upon him. While reflecting upon the death of his son Waldo two years prior, he admitted: “something which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar” (236). This recognition of the impermanence of the past prompted Emerson’s successive portrayal of the present: “Onward and onward. In liberated moments we know that a new picture of life and duty is already possible” (248-249). Although the above passages were written specifically regarding the death of Emerson’s son, “Experience” was representative of his reaction to the death of any loved one, particularly Charles. While Emerson clearly grieved for these losses, he maintained a strong commitment to remaining attentive to the present. Just as Ellen’s death in 1831 resulted in freeing Emerson from the confines of his life as a Unitarian minister, the loss of Charles in 1836 drove Emerson to deeply immerse himself into the composition of Nature.
Emerson’s devotion to the individual’s dynamic experience of the present was central to the ideas explored in *Nature*. Through the discussion of Emerson’s interaction with nature, Richardson emphasized this commitment: “To live in nature means above all to live in the present, to seize the day” (“Emerson and Nature” 104). Richardson further argued that for Emerson, nature and the experience of nature served as the starting point for his new theology (103).

Published on September 9, 1836, *Nature* embodied Emerson’s directive for the pursuit of a virtuous life. Emerson’s book explored the various uses, gifts and benefits of Nature in ascending order of importance. In his essay entitled “Emerson: The American Religion,” Bloom explored Emerson’s logic behind structuring *Nature* to proceed from the practical to the spiritual: “Man’s work moves beyond natural beauty through a power-making act of knowledge, which identifies the human form, beyond merely natural evidence, as the incarnation of God, an incarnation not yet elevated to full consciousness” (112). The first half of Emerson’s book systematically explored the multiple uses of the world: “Commodity; Beauty; Language; and Discipline” (14). These practical uses of nature provided the basis for Emerson’s succeeding chapters, which examined nature’s correspondence to the human mind and the unity between nature, humanity and the divine.

In the Introduction and first chapter of *Nature*, Emerson extended the ideas he initially expressed in “The Lord’s Supper,” specifically regarding individual
experience as essential to gaining an understanding of God. He asserted that every individual deserved to directly encounter all of nature, which included the divine, instead of accepting any mediated form as truth:

Our age is retrospective. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? (9).

This passage illuminated life itself as essential to gaining a true understanding of the meaning of existence. Nature and God could not be comprehended as a result of individuals granting credence to an external source devoid of any incorporation of their personal, original experience. Emerson then asserted that the true nature of humanity and God could be ascertained through the exploration of the self: “Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth” (9). Here, Emerson pointed out that residing within every human is an inherent understanding of truth. It is once more evident that the main obstacle to uncovering truth within the individual could be found in the tendency to blindly adhere to the forms and structures of society.

Following this discussion, Emerson clearly defined the universe as being “composed of Nature and the Soul.” Everything “which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME” was classified as “NATURE” (10). The importance of this distinction was then illustrated by Emerson’s description of a man’s experience while gazing at the
night sky. Emerson’s stated purpose for entreaty the man to gaze at the stars was so that he may experience solitude: “if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and what he touches” (11). When the man turned his eyes to the night sky, he engaged in an unmediated experience of nature. The effect of the stars upon his mind was profound: “the stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible” (11). The man’s recognition that the design of the world allowed him to perceive the stars, even though they were unreachable, instilled in him a sense of the sublime. Through his relation of the man’s unmediated encounter with nature in order to experience solitude, Emerson exemplified the distinction between the Self and Nature. Analyzed from this perspective alone, it would seem that Emerson was defining these two entities as entirely separate.

When read carefully, however, the idea of a total division between the Soul and Nature was quietly subverted through Emerson’s deliberate phrasing and word choice. In stating that “the stars awaken a certain reverence” (11), Emerson granted the stars a concrete role in the man’s experience of nature. Significantly, Emerson did not describe the man as experiencing the awakening as a result of admiring the sky. Rather, Emerson employed the active verb “awaken” and placed the stars as the acting subject of the sentence, while the man was the receiving object. Therefore, the stars themselves enkindled the man’s awakening to the presence of divinity within both himself and nature. Through according active
power to the stars, Emerson undermined the initial description of the stars as inaccessible and hinted at an equal, unified relationship between humanity and nature.

In addition to the stars’ capability for action, Emerson’s relation of the man’s experience of the sublime could not fully satiate the reader’s curiosity on the subject. Throughout the entire book, sublimity could only be described, rather than experienced by the reader. The reader gradually became aware that a full understanding of the effect of the stars upon the soul could only be attained through gazing upon the stars with his or her own eyes. This awareness subtly substantiated Emerson’s belief in the power of the individual’s personal experience. The inevitable acknowledgment of this fact uncovered Emerson’s invitation to all of his readers to keep their eyes and minds open to the power of nature. Embedded in this invitation is Emerson’s acknowledgment of the difficulty involved in truly perceiving nature: “The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other” (11). Emerson then asserted that the alignment of all the senses occurred during every human’s infancy. Because infancy is a condition experienced universally by every person, Emerson did not doubt that the individual was capable of completely reconciling his or her senses to each other and returning to this initial state. In fact, Emerson offered in *Nature* a potential pathway by which this reconciliation of the senses could occur: “In the woods, is perpetual youth ... In the woods we return to reason and faith” (11). Based upon
this rationale, the woods served as the setting for Emerson’s experience of unity with nature and the divine.

In perhaps one of his most memorable passages, Emerson described the effect nature had upon his own mind: “Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing, I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (12). While experiencing this sense of being a “transparent eyeball,” Emerson truly perceived the divinity within himself and nature. Furthermore, the presence of this divinity within both nature and Emerson’s soul attested to the unity that existed between humanity and nature. Interestingly, this unifying divinity was found in what Emerson had previously defined as the two distinct entities that constituted the universe. In his essay entitled “Emerson’s Religious Conception of Beauty,” Charles R. Metzger pointed out that through his portrayal of Nature and the Soul as both distinct and united, Emerson seemed to contradict himself. However, as Metzger reported with a hint of admiration, Emerson resolved this apparent conflict through a direct appeal to the human mind and the individual experience (70). Throughout Nature, Emerson placed incredible emphasis upon the individual’s original experience of nature, life and divinity, each as distinct entities, but ultimately united.

Emerson began his systematic examination of nature with a discussion of nature as Commodity. This chapter considered the benefits and uses of nature in relation to the physical senses of humanity. At the conclusion of this chapter, the
focus of *Nature* progressed to a contemplation of Beauty as “the mark God set upon virtue” (18). In his discussion of beauty, Emerson reinforced the potential for unity between humanity and nature, and again characterized nature as taking an active role in the cultivation of that unity: “Nature stretcheth out her arms to embrace man, only let his thoughts be of equal greatness” (19). Metzger characterized Emerson’s perception of Beauty “as dynamic or flowing” (68), and, like nature, ever-changing and active. Emerson asserted in *Nature* that “Nothing divine dies. All good is eternally reproductive. The beauty of nature re-forms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation” (20). In terms of practicality, Emerson regarded nature as beautiful because it was useful, active and reproductive. However, Emerson recognized beauty as a reflection of the unity between nature and the divine: “Nothing is quite beautiful alone: nothing but is beautiful in the whole. A single object is only so far beautiful as it suggests this universal grace” (20). Therefore, beauty was interpreted as representative of the union between divinity, nature and humanity. Emerson concluded this chapter by characterizing beauty as proclaiming the inner, eternal beauty of both nature and human souls.

As the next form of nature’s service to humanity, Emerson’s chapter regarding Language began by stating that “Nature is the vehicle of thought ... Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact” (21). As Richardson pointed out in his article entitled “Emerson and Nature,” Language was the central chapter of *Nature* (100). In this chapter, Emerson explored the development of language
from its earliest, most picturesque forms to its current manifestation. He was amazed by the fact that the incredible world in which we live furnished the materials for the expression of even the most trivial thoughts. Considering the diversity of application of the images of nature to human thought, Emerson believed that humanity had not come close to truly exercising the powers of nature in terms of language. Emerson expressed: “The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors, because the whole of nature is a metaphor, of the human mind ... This relation between the mind and matter is not fancied by some poet, but stands in the will of God, and so is free to be known by all men” (24-25). Emerson concluded his discussion of language with a reflection upon his sense of the necessity of the spirit to be manifested in the material. He interprets all forms as preexisting “in necessary Ideas in the mind of God” (25). Consequently, an understanding of the divine could be sought and ascertained through an interaction with nature as a material representation of the mind of God.

The following chapter, “Discipline,” concerned the self-discipline the individual must exercise in order to truly comprehend the symbolic meaning of nature. Emerson commented upon nature as an excellent ally to religion, since nature’s grandeur often inspired the religious sentiment in humanity. Additionally, nature’s constant conversion of ends into new means demonstrated that “a thing is good only so far as it serves” (29). These applications of nature to religion and virtue demonstrated the idea that “every natural process is a version of a moral sentence. The moral law lies at the centre of nature and radiates to the
circumference ... All things with which we deal, preach to us” (30). Consequently, it was the role of self-discipline to interpret and ascertain the moral truths which nature constantly expressed. Emerson asserted that these moral truths all tended towards the affirmation of the intimate unity of every creature with all of nature. This unity, Emerson argued, had “its source in the Universal Spirit. For, it pervades Thought also. Every universal truth which we express in words, implies or supposes every other truth” (31). Therefore, the same unity which Emerson as the transparent eyeball experienced in the woods, served to link not only nature and humans, but all truth.

In his chapters entitled “Idealism” and “Spirit,” Emerson contemplated the effect upon the human mind of the close union with divinity of which he believed every individual to be capable. He asserted that “no man touches these divine natures, without becoming, in some degree, himself divine” (38). He considered nature to be the medium through which the universal spirit was communicating with the individual and attempting to lead him or her back to itself. Nature was not built around humanity, but in and through the human soul. As a result, “man has access to the entire mind of the Creator, is himself the creator in the finite” (42). As displayed in this passage, Emerson had great faith in the divinity of the individual, upon which he built his theories regarding self-reliance. Emerson concluded “Idealism” with his assertion that the world “is, therefore, to us, the present expositor of the divine mind. It is a fixed point whereby we may measure our departure” (43). Humanity’s sense of separation from nature was caused by the
ever-growing estrangement between humanity and the divine. Emerson here argued that humanity must seek reunification with the divine through an unmediated, open experience of and interaction with nature.

In the final chapter of *Nature*, Emerson proclaimed: “A man is a god in ruins” (46). He characterized history as the account of the extended degradation of humankind. However, he maintained his optimistic view regarding the possibility for the restoration of humanity through the redemption of the soul. Emerson claimed that to aid in this task, humanity had been provided with a constant example of the intended relationship between nature, the soul and the divine through the condition of infants: “Infancy is the perpetual Messiah, which comes into the arms of fallen men, and pleads with them to return to paradise” (47). With this assertion, Emerson asserted his view of infancy as the epitome of the individual’s union with nature and perceived in its power the possibility for redemption and return to God. *Nature* concluded with Emerson’s call to action: “Every spirit builds itself a house; and beyond its house a world; and beyond its world a heaven. Know then, that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect ... Build therefore, your own world” (49). Emerson argued that because of the unity that exists between humanity, nature and the divine, humanity had the power to fashion a perfect world. The Creator provided the materials in nature, and humanity needed only to allow for the unmediated interaction between the soul and nature to achieve redemption.
Emerson’s belief in the individual’s potential to bring the perfect world into being suggested the inherent capacity for the individual to effect social reform. Although Emerson did not become involved in any social reform movements until later in his life, the ideas he presented in *Nature* inspired others to attempt to achieve reform on the social, as well as individual, level. In many of his essays, Emerson proclaimed the importance of allowing for an original experience of the world, and for the free cultivation of the intellectual and spiritual aspects of life. His arguments on behalf of the reform of the Unitarian Church set the stage for reform on the educational and economic level. Using Emerson’s ideas as their foundation, many of the Transcendentalists became involved in the early abolitionist movement and the woman’s rights movement. Emerson’s work had particular influence on Margaret Fuller, who dedicated her work to the improvement of the education and general condition of women.

**Transcendental Social Reform: Woman’s Rights and Margaret Fuller**

The Transcendentalists’ desire to inspire a different method of perceiving and interacting with the world assumed a concrete shape in a number of social reform projects. In his Introduction to *Transcendentalism: A Reader*, Myerson asserted: “If we live in a religious environment in which we can perceive God directly by cultivating our innate divinity ... naturally, the result is religious, philosophical, literary, and social change” (xxxiv). While Emerson and Thoreau strongly advocated accomplishing change through the reformation of the individual, the
other side of the movement, symbolized by Brooke Farm, dedicated its energies specifically to social reform. The Transcendentalists, and particularly Emerson, pushed for the democratization of the freedom for all people to pursue intellectual and spiritual cultivation (xxiv). Emerson referred to the Transcendentalist reformers as a whole as “the visible church of the existing generation” (qtd. in Salter 415). As evidenced in the majority of his works, Emerson clearly regarded religion as the gateway to reform. However, his focus initially remained centered mainly on individual reform and exploration, rather than applying his ideas to society at large. Margaret Fuller managed to work out a type of compromise between the two philosophies, and adopted the best aspects of both into her own work (Robinson 24).

Considered to be “America’s first major female intellectual” (Reynolds ix), Margaret Fuller was born in 1810. As a child, she was very thoroughly educated by her father, Timothy, in various subjects, including languages, history, literature and Biblical scholarship. In a brief biography of Fuller, Westbrook and Westbrook commented that “no favorite son could have been given a better intellectual and educational training by a father” (92). Fuller greatly benefited from this education, even earning the honor of being the first woman admitted into Harvard Library as a reader (92). Fuller’s interaction with the Transcendentalists displayed to her the need for reform with regards to education and the relationship between the sexes. Bearing in mind her own liberal education, she was appalled by the disadvantages enforced upon women by patriarchy (Buell xxi).
Even before identifying with any particular reform movement, the Transcendentalists had already been relatively open to the participation of women and to feminist critiques of patriarchy (Buell xii). The female influence was evident in many of the works, particularly Emerson’s *Nature*. Emerson’s characterization of truth as “a new weapon in the magazine of power” (26) promoted the acquisition of knowledge as a key to reform. Fuller applied this concept literally through the education of local Boston women in her Conversations, which consisted of small group discussions regarding topics such as education, intellect and the condition of women. Later in *Nature*, Emerson stated: “It is essential to a true theory of nature and of man, that it should contain somewhat progressive” (41). Embedded in this statement was a call for reform of societal practices which were not conducive to the development and cultivation of the individual soul. Emerson went on to point out that man is considered lord of the world “because he is its head and heart, and finds something of himself in every great and small thing” (45). This statement was interesting because in familial relations, men were typically characterized as the head, while women were the heart. Emerson’s depiction of man as both the head and heart suggested to Fuller that, like in her great works, when referring to man, both she and Emerson meant “both man and woman: these are the two halves of one thought” (*Woman in the Nineteenth Century* 5).

The supposition of the use of the word man as intended to include both men and women was strengthened by Emerson’s further argument in *Nature* that “Man is the dwarf of himself. Once he was permeated and dissolved by spirit. Out from
him sprang the sun and moon; from man, the sun; from woman, the moon” (47). In this passage, it is clearly evident that Emerson’s use of man in the general sense was meant to encompass both men and women. Additionally, this statement suggested that man’s degradation from complete unity with nature and the divine was influenced by his forced detachment from woman. Due to the clear divide between the role and treatment of the sexes, the potential for humanity to achieve redemption is diminished greatly. Later in *Nature*, Emerson made another subtle statement regarding the problem of the inequality of the sexes: “At present, man applies to nature but half his force … man is disunited with himself” (47-48). Man, representative of all humanity, only applied half his force because women were not permitted to cultivate their intellectual faculties to the same degree as men. Therefore, due to the lack of equality between men and women, humanity was experiencing a sense of discontinuity and was incapable of reaching its highest potential. This inequality was a violation of nature and of the dignity of the human soul, which was an integral part of the human experience, regardless of sex.

As one of Emerson’s closest friends, Fuller was also one of the few prominent female Transcendentalists. Her major work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* was “considered the foundational text of the women’s rights movement in America” (Reynolds ix). At the beginning of her career, Fuller spent a few years teaching at various positions, including one year at Alcott’s experimental school. These positions presented to Fuller to increasing need for the reform of education, particularly the education of women. With this goal in mind, Fuller began
conducting her famous intellectual and spiritual Conversations for women in 1839 (Westbrook and Westbrook 92). Elizabeth Peabody attended and transcribed the 1839-1840 Series of Boston Conversations, which provided a record of the topics and of Fuller’s views during that time. In the seventeenth conversation of that series, Fuller asserted her view regarding the intellectual differences between men and women. She believed that there was no single faculty exclusive to either sex, and that the difference between the sexes was only a matter of degree (“Boston Conversations” 177). Due to the fact that both men and women were endowed with the same intellectual resources, Fuller argued that they should be granted the same educational opportunities. However, Fuller recognized that this equality would only be granted if women were to prove their capacity for intellectual pursuits and take action with the goal of equality in mind. In order to accomplish this, Fuller constantly encouraged the women to allow freedom in their own intellectual and spiritual experiences: “She desired that whatever faculty we felt to be moving within us, that we should consider a principle of our perfection, and cultivate it accordingly” (“Boston Conversations” 177). Fuller was repulsed by the tendency to smother women behind the claim that their sentimentalism impeded their intellectual abilities.

However, Fuller became most indignant when confronted with the issue of woman’s lot: “Nothing I hate to hear of so much as woman’s lot. I wish I never could hear that word lot. Something must be wrong where there is a universal lamentation. Youth ought not to be mourned – for it ought to be replaced with
something better” (177). The characterization of the life of a woman as “woman’s lot” enraged Fuller because of its overbearing tone of resignation. Such a characterization implied that the condition of woman was unchangeable and must be accepted as it stood. Women who regarded their status as “woman’s lot” implied that their submissive position in society was natural. Fuller vehemently opposed this perspective when she asserted that “views must be essentially wrong when being became a burden … These false views haunted society with regards to women – or else mothers and fathers would not wish to repress or annihilate faculties – as a means of making their daughters happier” (178).

Fuller pointed out that the current refusal to grant women the same educational opportunities as men displayed the inherent knowledge that the status of women was unnatural. Society justified denying women the ability to develop their faculties based on a supposed fear that this would cause women to become dissatisfied within their role. Merely the acknowledgment of the potential for education to lead to restlessness implied that by limiting women to the role of wife and mother, society was suppressing their capacity for greater intellectual development.

Viewing the source of this problem as residing in the treatment of women during their youth, Fuller reprimanded parents who denied their daughters formal education equal to that of their sons. She asserted that it was impious to speak of “the immortal gifts of God – as if we had a right to tamper with them” (178). Not only was the denial of education a violation of the intellectual potential of women, Fuller here argued that it constituted an infringement of the will of God. As their
current position stood, women were suppressed both intellectually and spiritually. The refusal to grant women the proper opportunities to cultivate their intellect, resulted in the inability to reach their highest spiritual potential as well. As an early attempt to overcome these limitations, Fuller’s Conversations grew to be very popular, eventually benefitting over 200 women (Capper 513). In his article entitled “Margaret Fuller as Cultural Reformer: The Conversations in Boston,” Charles Capper reported that Fuller’s “creation of an independent circle of women organized to address specific needs of women was an inspiration and model” for the organization of women’s rights groups later in the movement (523).

The ideas explored in Fuller’s Conversations provided the focus of her later work in “The Great Lawsuit: Man versus Men. Woman versus Women,” which she later expanded into Woman in the Nineteenth Century (Westbrook and Westbrook 92-93). In addition to her contributions to the woman’s rights movement, Fuller was instrumental to the Transcendentalist movement through her position as editor the Transcendentalist periodical The Dial from 1840 to 1842. In his article “Transcendentalism and Its Times,” David M. Robinson commented that The Dial’s most significant contribution to the Transcendentalist movement consisted in the experience it granted Fuller as the first editor. The Dial also presented her with a ready venue for her critical work on Goethe and her 1843 essay, discussed below (20).
The primary purpose of Fuller's Boston Conversations was the advancement of her participants’ intellectual status through an open discussion of various intellectual and spiritual topics. Her meetings granted these women the opportunity to express their view and concerns in an uninhibited forum. These Conversations, however, were only accessible to local women. While the Conversations were successful and influential, Fuller recognized the need to address her ideas to a more universal audience. Therefore, Margaret Fuller’s landmark essay “The Great Lawsuit. Man versus Men. Woman versus Women,” signaled her transition into the realm of social reform. The essay was a treatise on the rights of woman that “adapted Emersonian individualism to meet the needs of women whose opportunities for full individual growth had been thwarted” (Robinson 24). In Fuller’s feminist manifesto, she called for the equality of the sexes as beneficial to man and woman alike. The essay applied Emerson’s ideas of self-reliance to interpersonal relations (Myerson 383-384).

Fuller began her essay by asserting that “whatever the soul knows how to seek, it must attain” (386). Therefore, once women recognized the importance of attaining equality with men, they would be freed from the oppressive nature of the patriarchal society in which Fuller lived. Additionally, since Emerson argued that the soul was the presence of the divine within the individual, anything the soul recognized as worth seeking must be the intention of the divine and the natural condition of humanity. The soul would only be capable of seeking truth. Therefore,
if the soul of woman recognized her equality with man as something worth seeking, then this equality between the sexes must be the natural condition of humanity. Additionally, if the soul recognized this equality as truth, it would inevitable be realized as the soul endeavored to attain its perfect existence. Fuller’s statement also reflected back to Emerson’s conclusion in *Nature*: “Build therefore, your own world” (49). Fuller applied Emerson’s call to action through her assertion that if women resolved to seek their equality with men as their natural right, it would be accomplished.

Fuller pointed out that this optimistic philosophy could benefit all those who are oppressed or whose condition is not conducive to reaching the individual’s highest potential. Before delving into the particulars of her argument regarding the liberation of women, Fuller asserted a sympathy of condition with the African slaves. Capper pointed out that “the abolitionist movement was in fact the crucial political driving force behind all movements for reform, including women’s reform” (522). In her essay, Fuller lamented that although “freedom and equality have been proclaimed” on behalf of America as a whole, the nation still allowed the “monstrous display of slave dealing and slave keeping” (389). However, she remained optimistic in regards to the discontinuation of this institution: “It is inevitable that an external freedom, such as has been achieved for the nation, should be so also for every member of it” (389). The foundation for the arguments on behalf of both women and slaves was laid in the birth of the America and its liberation from the oppressive control of the British empire.
Fuller did not find the abolitionist movement’s support of the women’s rights movement to be not surprising, especially considering the similar denial of rights to both slaves and women. Fuller condemned the male perspective “that the infinite soul can only work through [women and slaves] in already ascertained limits” (392). Women and slaves deserved to be granted the same freedom to cultivate their intellectual and spiritual existence as men possessed. For if both the woman and the slave possessed a soul, “to one master only are they accountable” (394), which would be God. Men did not have the right or the power to violate the intentions of God through the suppression of the human potential to cultivate the divinity that exists within every individual. Therefore, women and slaves must both be liberated from the oppression of patriarchy.

However, Fuller refused to accept any male humoring of the female sex through small allowances in regards to the cultivation of various faculties. Fuller demanded that “inward and outward freedom for woman, as much as for man, shall be acknowledged as a right, not yielded as a concession” (394). Woman demanded liberation, not as a privilege, but as a right based on the divinity within her soul. At this point in her essay, Fuller clearly defined her goals in regards to woman’s rights: “What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely, and unimpeded to unfold such powers as were given her when we left our common home” (394). Fuller was not advocating for woman’s assumption of the male role in society, but instead for an equal opportunity for the cultivation of the intellectual and spiritual elements of
human existence. With this essay, Fuller was asserting that it was a violation of the divinity of the soul to deny women their rightful opportunities to refine their spiritual existences.

She further demanded that men recognize that the sole purpose of women was not to serve them. Women “have come from heaven, a commissioned soul, a messenger of truth and love” (399). When confined to the role of caretaker of husbands and children, women’s capacity to express this truth was severely limited. The oppressive institution of patriarchy did not grant women the opportunity for their voices to be heard. Men refused to allow women to enter the public sphere. Her continued confinement to the private would eliminate her chance to advocate on behalf of the interests of women and express the truth and divinity evident to her soul. As a caretaker and housekeeper only, women were denied their role as messengers of truth. Fuller further pointed out that it was undeniably true that women are “possessors of and possessed by immortal souls ... with God alone for their guide and their judge” (401-402). These immortal souls must be allowed the same cultivation as the souls that resided within males. In order to accomplish this, women must be liberated from their oppressed status in patriarchal society.

Fuller further asserted that if women were free, “were they wise fully to develop the strength and beauty of woman, they would never wish to be men or manlike” (402). She did not advocate for the woman to assume the male role, but for the male to recognize the value of woman as an immortal soul. If the opportunity was granted for women to cultivate her soul, man would come to
recognize and appreciate the value and difference of the woman’s perspective. Therefore, Fuller demanded that it be “acknowledged that [women] have intellect which needs developing, that they should not be considered complete, if beings of affection and habit alone” (411). She explored the male and the female as representative of “the two sides of the great radical dualism. But, in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another … There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman” (418). Here, Fuller rejected the idea of gender as opposing classifications with characteristics that were mutually exclusive. She implied that the similarities and unifying factors between men and women are more important and of higher occurrence than the differences.

Fuller concluded her essay with an appeal to the Emersonian idea of self-reliance: “Every relation, every gradation of nature, is incalculably precious, but only to the soul which is poised upon itself, and to whom no loss, no change, can bring dull discord, for it is in harmony with the central soul” (419). Through the publication of her essay, Fuller was striving to elevate women to the point that they were dependent upon themselves alone and fully open to the experience of the divine. In this passage, Fuller also reflected back to Emerson’s assertion in *Nature* that every person is united with all of nature through the individual soul’s interaction with the universal soul. If, as Emerson asserted in *Nature*, the individual was “part or particle of God,” then men and women were part and particle of each other due to the unifying force of the divine. Fuller closed her
argument with a call for the woman who would succeed in vindicating all women (422).
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