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Koncept individualismu ve vybraných dílech  
R. W. Emersona, H. D. Thoreaua a Walta Whitmana

Bakalářská práce

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# Concept of individualism in the selected works of R. W. Emerson, H. D. Thoreau and Walt Whitman

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### **Cíl, metody, literatura, předpoklady:**

Tato práce se zabývá konceptem individualismu- soběstačností - ve vybraných dílech předních amerických spisovatelů R.W.Emersona, H.D. Thoreaua a W.Whitmana. V první části práce stručně představuje historické pozadí Ameriky raného 19. století. Dále se pak zaměřuje na Transcendentalismus, jehož základním rysem byl právě individualismus. Individualismu se podrobně věnuje hlavní teoretická část, vycházející z eseje Sebedůvěra od R.W. Emersona. Tato část vytvoří teoretické jádro práce, na které navazuje část druhá, v níž budou tyto teoretické poznatky ilustrovány na díle Walden od Henry Davida Thoreaua a nakonec na básni Zpěv o mně ze sbírky Stébla trávy od Walta Whitmana. V závěru práce dojde k syntéze poznatků o individualismu čili soběstačnosti a jeho reálnému projevu i přínosu, promítajícím se ve zmíněných dílech Thoreaua a Whitmana.

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## Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci pod vedením svého vedoucího bakalářské práce vypracovala samostatně a uvedla jsem všechny použité prameny a literaturu.

V Hradci Králové dne .....

## Poděkování

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## Anotace

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Klíčová slova: Individualismus, soběstačnost, sebedůvěra, lidskost, svoboda, Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau

## Annotation

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The present bachelor thesis is concerned with the concept of individualism – self-reliance – in the selected works of the outstanding American writers Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman. The first part briefly introduces the historical background of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century America. The next chapter focuses on Transcendentalism whose main feature was individualism, the bedrock of this paper. The core of the theoretical part of the thesis concentrates on the concept of individualism based on the essay *Self reliance* by Ralph Waldo Emerson. The second part of the paper illustrates the findings from the theoretical part, firstly, on the work *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau, and secondly, on the poem *Song of Myself* from *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman. In the conclusion, the findings from both parts of the thesis are confronted.

Keywords: Individualism, self-reliance, self-trust, humanity, freedom, Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau

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# Introduction

Individualism or self-reliance was the core mutual value of America's most prominent thinkers Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman. They were contemporaries who deeply believed in the divinity of Existence and were convinced that the most important was one's self-awareness. Their effort to bring the importance of one's individuality into the consciousness of people is the symbol of their work. The whole life, they spread the idea that it was being individual which could bring man freedom and a profound experience of life.

The main attempt of the present bachelor thesis is to analyze the concept of individualism based on the vision of Ralph Waldo Emerson. In order to examine the effect of Emerson's thoughts, the concept is, in the second part of the thesis illustrated on the real examples of the manifestation of one's individuality. For the illustration were selected the masterpieces *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau and *Song of Myself* by Walt Whitman.

The first chapter provides a brief historical background of America in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the period, the country went through one of the greatest changes in its history. Americans were a young nation at the very beginning of formation of their national identity which was during the following decades shaped by the influence of the emerging Transcendentalist movement. The next chapter focuses on the American Transcendentalism, especially on its key values to which dominates the individualistic principle of self-reliance which Emerson advocated. The core part of the thesis is concerned with the conception of individualism which is analyzed with the use of Emerson's essay *Self-reliance*. In the next part of the thesis, the observed principles of individualism are illustrated on the previously mentioned works of Thoreau and Whitman. The final part compares Emerson's ideas and the findings from *Walden* and *Song of Myself*.

# 1 Historical context: America in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century

At the beginning of the 19th century, the United States were a country only a few decades old. Their hope was put in the rich new land they inhabited which went through a continuous change in all spheres of people's lives. As Gray states, at the time, America was becoming an expanding giant with confident prospects. By the 1840s, the living conditions and environment transmuted, under the process of industrialization. The issues regarding the human rights such as slavery, oppression of the Natives or women's inequality were the issues of the day that provoked the emergence of the abolitionist and feminist movements (Gray, 2004, p. 100-103). In the middle of the intense transformation, America was searching for its cultural identity. It called for the American literature and philosophy that would reflect the reality and ideals of *The New World* and its people.

## 1.1 Shift of ideals

During the progressive era, the shift of ideals was noticeable, generally manifesting the importance of the individual and the belief in man's potential. As Myerson mentions, the humanist ideals got in the foreground of thinking and changed approaches in religion, literature, philosophy and education (Myerson, 2000, p. xxvii). In relation to the change, Porte comments on the democratizing tendencies in Europe which were also a sign of the awakening of individualist values in the Western civilization (Porte, 1999, p. 17). In philosophy, *Empiricism* and rationalist beliefs were *challenged by Intuition* (Myerson, 2000, xxvii). Finally, the concernment with the individual and the belief in his innate wisdom became the key values of the Romantic movement which were, in the United States, followed by the first wave of the American freethinkers: the Transcendentalists.

## 1.2 American Transcendentalism

During the 1830s, a new tendency took shape among the American intellectuals. Transcendentalism is generally labelled as a literary, philosophical and religious movement. It is considered the major influence upon formation of the national identity by the formulation of the American values and the enhancement of producing of the American literature. America's first famous thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson is known as the leading Transcendentalist. He was followed by other renowned writers and thinkers such as Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, Theodor Parker, George Ripley, Elizabeth Peabody, Bronson Alcott and others. These figures became known as the members of the Transcendental Club which held meetings for at least a decade following the year 1836. In the most general sense, Transcendentalists are considered a community of individualists.

### 1.2.1 The vision of the Transcendentalists

The movement itself embodied the ideals of the Romantic period. As Porte stated, Transcendentalists greatly sympathized with the contemporary philosophy of the German Romanticism represented by Goethe, which was introduced in America through the English Romanticism of the Lake poets – Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth and Thomas Carlyle. Furthermore, Transcendentalists drew from Hindu or Chinese philosophy. One of the most crucial influences was the idealism originating in the work of Plato. Among other significant sources was, for instance, the German mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. (Porte, 1999, p. 18-19) These facts reveal the broad perspective Transcendentalists had. They synthesized the diverse sources to mould it into their own individualist vision.

Between the years 1840 and 1844, the group published *the Dial*, a monthly periodical which consisted of pieces of literature and philosophy they were inspired by. It also included various comments and essays regarding, inter alia, the contemporary political and social issues such as the fight for the women rights and abolition. (Porte, 1999, p. 20) The original editor of *the Dial* was Margaret Fuller. She was an influential fighter for women rights and the author of the significant work *Woman in the 19th century* (1845). Together with Elizabeth Peabody, they held *Conversations*, initially classes for women, which were supposed to encourage people to believe in their inner potential (Gray, 2004, p. 135-136). Other Transcendentalists were engaged in the reform movements as well. For instance, Theodore

Parker initiated the educational reform and many of the Transcendentalists were involved in the abolitionist resistance. (Porte, 1999, p. 22-23) The greatest part of their engagement, however, was their individual action. Such was Bronson Alcott's experiment at *the Brook Farm*, an attempt for a *cooperative community* (Gray, 2004, p. 135) which, however, collapsed within one year. Another famous experiment was led by George Ripley who founded an agricultural community at *Fruit lands* which existed during the years 1841-1847. Among the participants in the experiment was also the prominent American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne who sympathized with the Transcendentalist ideals. (Gray, 2004, p. 135) Thoreau, as well as Emerson, were, in a sense, the absolute individualists and did not wish to make part of any movement or community. Instead, they openly expressed their support of the oppressed and, thereby, stood against injustice. For instance, Thoreau gave a public address on behalf of John Brown, an abolitionist and liberalist who was later executed.

Many of the renowned Transcendentalists had a religious background. Ralph Waldo Emerson along with George Ripley and Theodor Parker, were initially Unitarian ministers. (Porte, 1999, p. 16) It was in the religious circles, where the Transcendentalist revolution took root. Emerson himself and others who were later led by his voice, felt uncertain about the Unitarian conventional and dogmatic approach towards faith. (Myerson, 2000, p. 1) As Transcendentalists, they released themselves from the God of the Church for they believed that God could be experienced only individually and that it resided within. From this conviction proceeds their mutual value, which was individualism.

In order to shed light on what in the Transcendentalist view individualism meant, it is first important to comment on the essay *Nature* (1836) by Ralph Waldo Emerson, the essential work of Transcendentalism. In it, he claims:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face, through their eyes. Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Let us demand our own works and laws and worship. (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 35)

In this passage can be already recognized what would become the key tendency of the movement. It exhorts to stop living out of the experience of the past and look instead to the future, to create the new and original from the potential of the present. In his introduction to Emerson's *Selected Essays*, Larzer Ziff aptly pointed out that, in the essay, Emerson gave

Americans another viewpoint on the world around them. He taught that Nature was a great teacher and an infinite source of inspiration. (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 16-17) Therefore, there was no reason to dwell on the past anymore.

According to Transcendentalists, the principles of nature, representing the physical world, mirrored the spiritual ones. Perceiving nature as *transcendental*, they believed it was the main source of wisdom and thus, the powerful means of the human self-cultivation. As Porte and Gray argue, the self-cultivation was the basis of the Transcendentalist individualist pursuits. (Porte, 1999, p. 15; Gray, 2004, p. 138)

The term *transcendental* comes from Immanuel Kant, the contemporary idealist philosopher who opposed the empiricist notion that man was a *tabula rasa* (born without the innate knowledge). According to Kant, the *transcendental* denotes all human experience which surpasses the knowledge of the senses (Collins English Dictionary). In relation to the belief of Transcendentalists, man was a wise spiritual being and could reach the Universal knowledge when connected with nature. Ultimately, in the Transcendentalist perception, the whole existence, or reality, was interconnected and proceeded from one source which they called *The Over-Soul* (God or Universe). The divine trinity was man, nature and Universe.

[T]hat great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere [is] that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other [...] We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul [...] (Emerson and Ziff, 1995, p. 206)

Porte and many others who immersed into the Transcendentalist vision tied to the age of change in which the soul-seekers found themselves, point out the optimistic enthusiasm the movement was characteristic with. Emerson, as well as many of his contemporary fellows, felt that "there was a new consciousness" (Porte, 1999, p. 13). For that reason, which Porte confirms, they believed that individualism could be the principle which would lead to the transformation of society as everyone would understand that man is divine (Porte, 1999, p. 13-14).

## 2 Life and Legacy of Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson is recognized as the first American philosopher, a leading lecturer, essayist, poet and the chief figure of Transcendentalism.

He was born on the 25th May 1803 in Boston, Mass into a family with a long religious history. His father was a prominent clergyman of the Boston Unitarian Church. After the father's death when Emerson was 8 years old, he was raised by his aunt Mary Moody Emerson, a lady of a strong moral sense, who had a great influence upon his intellectual development. (Porte, 1999, p. 30-47) Graduated from the Harvard College, where he studied Latin, Greek, History and Rhetoric, he continued at the Harvard Divinity School after which he entered the Unitarian Church, ready to start as a preacher. (The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2016) During this time, however, his doubts regarding the Unitarian practice and dogmatic beliefs caused insecurity about his vocation as a preacher. (Porte, 1999, p. 15-18)

In 1829, he married Ellen Tucker who died of tuberculosis only a year and a half after their marriage. The devastating event even more enhanced by Emerson's spiritual crisis was one of the turning points in his life. He resigned the minister post and embarked on journey over Europe which lasted almost a year. After visiting Italy, he went to England, where he met with the great Romantic figures - Wordsworth, Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle (the Lake poets) with whom, especially Thomas Carlyle, he shared his ideals. Returned from Europe to Boston, he set up as a lecturer and started touring and giving lectures around the country, by which he became a renowned public figure. In 1835 he settled in Concord, those times turning into the epicentre of the American intelligence and cultural flourishing.

Emerson's first essay Nature published in 1836 got in the foreground of the forming American Transcendentalism. For a time, he was the editor of the Transcendentalist magazine *the Dial*. In the Transcendentalist circles, he is considered the main initiative and inspirational figure. He synthesized many of ideas coming from the East with those of the Western civilization. He was influenced from the Chinese philosophy or Bhagavad Gita to the idealists such as Plato or his contemporary - Immanuel Kant from whom he took the term *transcendental*.

The term *self-reliance* which he used as a title to one of his most renowned essays, is representative to his lifetime concern with the individual, the belief in man, the soul and the interconnection of the human beings and God - Universe or Ultimate Existence, which he



calls *the Over-Soul*. All his life, Emerson was trying to awaken Americans by giving them the sense of being individuals. He believed in the democratic potential of America and was trying to emphasize the real social progress comes from the spiritual awareness of the individual and not from the material abundance or political power which America fostered (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 7-27 ; Porte, 1999, p. 1-12).

In his constant emphasis on the self, Emerson was reacting to the social tyranny of the American crowd. [...] He pursued the ideal of destroying the mob through bringing to each of its members a sense of himself as a separate person. (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 21)

As a Transcendentalist, he was one of the absolute individualists in that he refused to make part of any group or community for he believed only the individual effort is sincere. He was an advocate of the direct action. Although never engaging politically, he supported antislavery, spoke on behalf of women and wrote letters protesting against the oppression of the Native Americans. This stance also reflects his conviction that all men are equal and thus, deserve the same rights.

Equally important is his Transcendentalist perception of nature. He understands it as the symbol of the whole Existence, containing all principles which a human can observe and learn by his dwelling in nature, and reach a true connection with himself and *the Over-Soul*. From his own enlightening experience comes the famous excerpt of his becoming *a transparent eyeball*.

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 eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 39)

Along with *Nature* and *On Self-reliance*, other of his notable and, in its own times revolutionary essays, are: *The Divinity School Address*, *History*, *The American Scholar*, *the Over-Soul*, *Experience* or the late work *Conduct of Life* containing the essay *Fate*.

The often emphasized important impact on the American intellectual sphere had his address *The American Scholar*. As Gray mentions, Holmes claimed that the work was accepted as *The Declaration of the Intellectual Independence* of America (Gray, 2004, p. 133). In the essay, Emerson promotes his ideal of an American as a scholar who educates himself by receiving knowledge from literature and nature (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 84-95) - which was a typical exhortation for self-cultivation. He calls for Americans who would be *Men Thinking* (Emerson, 1982, p. 88-89) – those who would actualize the wisdom and experience of the previous generations through their own original thinking and bring the new perception to the present age. This also refers to the previously commented message of Emerson's *Nature* (in the 1<sup>st</sup> Chapter) which corresponding with the idea to look at the world from the present time.

The last mention regarding his transmission of the individualist ideal can be made on *The Divinity School Address* which he addressed in 1838. The public speech provoked a scandal in the religious circles for he expressed, in the words of the Czech translator of Emerson's work Josef Špaček, that it would be better to remain a pagan raised in a cult at the decline, than a Christian, a slave of the oppressive dogmas (Emerson, Špaček and Kočí 1927, p. xxiv). This demonstrates Emerson's own individualist assertion by which he rejected to ever accept the false truths of the environment he came from.

## 3 Concept of Individualism according to R. W. Emerson

### 3.1 Introduction to R.W. Emerson's essay on individualism

Individualism which became the characteristic feature of Transcendentalism is the subject of Emerson's essay *On Self-reliance* (1841). The philosophical treatise on the individual and society summarizes Emerson's ideas of the inherent power of man - the crucial thought and central theme of his philosophy of life. The essay is written in the typically Emersonian poetic style which attains the reader with the intensity of a personal message. It is a text encouraging people to be aware of the inspiration, freedom and equality the world can offer to them if they strive for truth and reunite with their most genuine beliefs.

This chapter provides a framing for the fundamental aspects of Emerson's concept of individualism. In the first part of the theoretical analysis, the principle of self-reliance is defined and explained. In the second part, self-reliance is observed from the point of view of the individual's confrontation with the social principles of conformity, consistency and imitation. In the selected masterpieces *Walden* by H.D. Thoreau and *Song of Myself* by W. Whitman, self-reliance is examined through their confrontation with the social principles for, in this way, their individual manifestation of the Self is best observable.

Finally, it is important to add that both Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman were immensely influenced by Emerson's work. This particular piece reflects their lifetime focus and effort to explore and live their humanity and freedom, using Thoreau's words, "to the marrow of life" (Thoreau, 1995, p. 83), which they transmitted through their art preserving the elevated Self and intimacy for the next generations.

### 3.2 Individualism: self-awareness and inner integrity

Perception is not whimsical, but fatal. (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 188)

Emerson uses the term self-reliance by which he denotes the spiritual individualism based on the inner integrity of the individual. He describes the self-awareness as one's connection to the soul and believes that self-knowledge helps man to reveal his true identity, which enables him to act upon the principles of his nature. Emerson maintains that he who is aware of his true Self realizes that "imitation is suicide" (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 176) and "envy is ignorance" (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 176), for, as he argues, the right direction in life, only the individual himself can discover and understand. Therefore, Emerson exhorts to uncover and follow the individual truth and face sturdily the pressure of the external demands.

In its core, self-reliance is the reliance on Intuition which Emerson considers *the primary wisdom* of man (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 187). He calls the human instinctive, or spontaneous, essence *the Aboriginal Self* (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 187) and says that intuition providing man with guidance is inherent "whilst all later teachings are tuitions" (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 187). The statement implies that the individual is born with the inner compass superior to any other knowledge, which makes him naturally self-reliant, thus, independent on other support than his own.

In a broader sense, the principle of self-existence is presented by Emerson as the essential law of nature, of all being. As a parallel to the human, it is the self-trust which indicates one's power and greatness. Emerson, hereby, demonstrates that self-reliance, the way of inhabiting the maximum of the capacity one has, is the most natural and ultimate state of being.

Self-existence is the attribute of the Supreme Cause [...]. Power is in nature the essential measure of right. Nature suffers nothing to remain in her kingdoms which cannot help itself. The genesis and maturation of a planet, its poise and orbit, the bended tree recovering itself from the strong wind, the vital resources of every animal and vegetable, are demonstrations of the self-sufficing, and therefore self-relying soul. (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 191)

The spiritual meaning of self-reliance which Emerson advocates, suggests that the soul is wise and also that, in the heart, all men are equal because everyone has the unique essence and sense of truth. The heart knows no gender, no race or religion. It knows but humanity. “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men, — that is genius” (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 175). The idea also implies that every genuine thought of an individual is a contribution to the whole humankind.

In Emerson’s view, the connection with the soul is not only one’s ability to experience the individual independence but also an experience of Divinity and the union of all things. In the present moment, in *the hour of vision* (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 190), everyone may share the highest and explore the depth of Existence.

The soul raised over passion beholds identity and eternal causation, perceives the self-existence of Truth and Right, and calms itself with knowing that all things go well. Vast spaces of nature, the Atlantic Ocean, the South Sea, — long intervals of time, years, centuries, — are of no account.

This which I think and feel underlay every former state of life and circumstances, as it does underlie my present, and what is called life, and what is called death. Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim. This one fact the world hates, that the soul becomes; for that forever degrades the past, turns all riches to poverty, all reputation to a shame, confounds the saint with the rogue, shoves Jesus and Judas equally aside. (Emerson and ZIFF, 1982, 190)

In the excerpt, Emerson describes the transcendental state in which man experiences eternity and is capable of beholding the principles of Existence. He can acknowledge that the human soul makes part of the Creation where everything coexists in equality and in the constant process of renewal.

According to this notion, a conscious moment is the gate to understanding the indifference of time, the interconnected reality of life and death and the powerful potential of presence. By this observation, Emerson emphasized the importance of the individual insight. It follows that the only way of discerning what is essential and common to all men is to search in the individual consciousness which can be reached, again, through the individual participation in the experience of reality.

The key expressions in this passage “life only avails, not the having lived” and “the world hates that the soul becomes”, suggest that there are no limits to the possibilities the individual has for the soul is present and pointing to the new and the following. It can be concluded, that only self-awareness brings one to the acknowledgement of the real freedom which is present in life, and also exposes the potential accessible to every human.

The life attitude which Emerson propagates is to open up to the expression of the character for “[...] [N]o man can violate his nature. [...] A character is like an acrostic or Alexandrian stanza; — read it forward, backward, or across, it still spells the same thing.” (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 183) In other words, one cannot change what he is and “we [humans] pass for what we are” (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 183). The only way to preserve the inner integrity is self-realisation and self-acceptance.

To summarize the previously said, the definition and also the essential aspect of Emerson’s self-reliance is the awareness of the authentic Self, of one’s own nature, which means also the awareness of the soul. From such a state proceeds a deeper knowledge of principles in life. Self-reliance is as if a true self-confidence which stems from the spiritual assurance. As a result, a man allows himself to follow the inner instruction and to truly develop his potential. At the same time, the spiritual awakening may teach the human about the equal essence of all people although the individuality is unique to everyone.

### 3.3 The individual and society: confrontation with conformity, consistency and imitation

It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude. (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 181)

What is important to start with is the reality of the human unawareness of the true Self which Emerson observes. He maintains that the fear of being oneself and lack of the real self-confidence are the result of the spiritual disconnection. Fear seems to be one of the most obvious facts creating the gap within humans as well as among them. "The sinew and heart of man seem to be drawn out, and we have become timorous, desponding whimpers. We are afraid of truth, afraid of fortune, afraid of death, and afraid of each other" (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 194).

In other words, men are not aware of the Soul and they are not aware of the potential residing within. This fact underlies the whole essay as a constant reminder of what is being forgotten, and, ultimately, it should be seen as one of the main reasons of Emerson's lifetime effort to spread the idea of the importance of self-perception. According to his notion, the unawareness is the reason of man's search for truth and assurance outside himself and finally, the dependence on the foreign values by which he, in a sense, gives up his natural freedom to live fully by his own dispositions.

That popular fable of the sot who was picked up dead drunk in the street, carried to the duke's house, washed and dressed and laid in the duke's bed, and, on his waking, treated with all obsequious ceremony like the duke, and assured that he had been insane, owes its popularity to the fact, that it symbolizes so well the state of man, who is in the world a sort of sot, but now and then wakes up, exercises his reason, and finds himself a true prince. (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 186)

At this point, it is necessary to define and analyze three social principles which, according to Emerson, prevent the individual from being self-reliant when confronting with society. These are: 1) conformity, 2) consistency and 3) imitation. In Emerson's view, the key

principle of self-reliance is the individual's ability to confront with them by which the individual spiritual integrity manifests itself.

With a regard to the works selected for illustration, Thoreau's self-reliance in *Walden* represents the practical one. He withdraws from society to behold truth and experience life individually, by which he also mirrors the narrowness of the social reality. His commitment is to live in truth and freedom which he attains by his self-sufficiency, taking matters of everyday life into his own hands. Hereby, he is trying to prove that one can live independently if one is aware what is truly important and possible.

In the case of Whitman, the poem *Song of Myself* is a symbol of the spiritual self-reliance. It is a manifestation of independency and divinity of human being which Whitman reaches in the reality of the awakened and all-perceiving Self. By the spiritual self-reliance, he wants to demonstrate the freedom which lies within man.



### 3.3.1 Conformity

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. 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. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 178)

As Emerson argues, one of the greatest barriers of one's self-reliance is conformity. It is the main social principle which makes one to adapt and accept the truths and moral code of society which, however, may not have root in him. The truth originating from the social consensus is a rigid truth – a dogma, a convention, determining what is morally good or bad. From the quotation above, it seems clear that, according to the author, the integrity of society stems from its living at the detriment of the privilege of being individual. Society values conformity, while the deepest value of every individual is the inner integrity. Society gives importance to “names and customs”, while the equivalent of the individual is the new, original and creative for “[e]very new mind is a new classification [...]” (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 196). Hereby, Emerson is trying to make obvious that conformity is a social virtue which, in fact, denies the wisdom and independence of the individual and represses the individual expression.

Conformity indicates one's adoption of foreign truths which also includes adherence to institutions and groups. This, however, is the point at which the individual can never be authentic. Emerson's conviction is that to conform is to ‘wear a prison-uniform’. In other words, conformity makes one loose connection with the Self which means ignorance of one's true identity. This notion can be demonstrated on one of the most powerful examples regarding the religious conformity where the individual experience of God is substituted by the limiting authority of the God represented by a church.

I hear a preacher announce for his text and topic the expediency of one of the institutions of his church. Do I not know beforehand that not possibly can he say a new and spontaneous word? Do I not know that, with all this ostentation of examining the grounds of the institution, he will do no such thing? Do I not know that he is pledged to himself not to look but at one side, — the permitted side,

not as a man, but as a parish minister? He is a retained attorney, and these airs of the bench are the emptiest affectation. (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 181)

Therefore, Emerson insists that “[w]hoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist” (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 178), for only a nonconformist can face the pressure of the social standards. Accordingly, nonconformity enables one to have courage to seek for the individual truth beyond what is commonly perceived as truth and thus, resolve the questions of the good and evil in relation to that. Emerson argues that the individual should not feel responsibility towards anyone or anything else but his own consciousness. “No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it” (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 179).

As the statement implies, the individual should discern the right from wrong according to his own consciousness and always act in accord with it. It says that everyone has a sense of morality and has to decide what is true, good, important to him, and what is not. Similarly, “[f]ew and mean as my gifts may be I actually am [...]” (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 180) mean that it is better to be genuine, faithful to the truth, than to make good impressions which are socially demanding. The message is that one should defend one’s own interests at any circumstance.

Finally, Emerson demonstrates that it is more than natural for man to let his character manifest itself and stand for its own standards. “Infancy conforms to nobody, all conforms to it” (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 177). It follows that not a child’s or a young person’s acts are moulded by the expectation of others. A young one does not pursue his interests but ,gives a genuine verdict’. In this way, Emerson proves that the genuine expression of character is an evidence that man is born a nonconformist.

### 3.3.2 Consistency

The other terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency; a reverence for our past act or word, because the eyes of others have no other data for computing our orbit than our past acts, and we are loath to disappoint them. (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 182)

Consistency is the second principle which seems to be an undeniable social element. As Emerson claims, it is the omnipresent clinging on the past penetrating the life approach of humans because of which one is not able to merge with the Self. The individual feels responsible for opinions and deeds that lay behind him and identifies with it as if it was his character by which, solely, he is recognizable to others.

It feels appropriate to quote here one of the most popular of Emerson's passages:

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day. — 'Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.' — Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood. (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 183)

The line "with consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do" confirms the earlier mentioned expression "the soul becomes". In Emerson's view, the soul is unrepeatable for in its ongoing process it always brings the new. Hence, as everything makes part of the stream of event and actualisation and the change is inevitably present and natural, so it is in the case of one's development. This idea reflects the paradox of consistency, as well as of imitation which will be discussed in the next chapter. To conclude, consistency is what keeps man remote from truly becoming what he is at every moment of his life.

It follows that the individual should not resist the change of his views. In this regard, contradicting oneself is natural and indicates openness to the advancement of things. As Emerson points out the names of the great figures who were misunderstood, it can be deduced

that it is important to keep one's mind open, to overcome the fear of being misunderstood and follow the present visions and decisions. As Emerson maintains, "[w]hy drag about this corpse of your memory" (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 183) one should "[...] bring the past for judgment into the thousand-eyed present, and live ever in a new day" (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 183). Literally, the individual should examine the validity of his truths and be flexible to change his viewpoints.

### 3.3.3 Imitation

Emerson calls imitation *travelling of the mind* (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 198). It suggests that whenever one imitates, he is not present to what is within himself. Emerson claims: "Soul is no traveller [...] a wise man stays at home [...]" (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 197). "[But] the intellect is a vagabond" (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 198) and one easily identifies with foreign ideals, not even realizing or admitting it does not come from his own mind. That is why Emerson insists that "creeds are the disease of the intellect" (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 196). Just as the creeds, traditions and so the like mean man's mind adjusted to the knowledge or experience foreign to himself. Similar to consistency, imitation also mirrors that humankind worships truth which does not reflect the present. What Emerson is trying to say is that humankind dwells on the past although, again, it is in paradox with the universal principle of the Soul – a constant change or rebirth.

Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another, you have only an extemporaneous, half possession. That which each can do best, none but his Maker can teach him. Where is the master who could have taught Shakespeare? (...) Every great man is a unique. Shakespeare will never be made by the study of Shakespeare. Do that which is assigned you, and you cannot hope too much or dare too much. (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 199)

The resistance to imitation is related to the awareness of one's true identity. If one knows and accepts his true identity, then he stands for his purpose and perception of reality. Emerson argues that only the individual himself can fulfil the potential when discovering it. Whenever the individual would ignore the uniqueness he demonstrates, and borrow from or learn to foreign talents, he would never reach the Self. He would not become whole but

remain a half. Ultimately, the individual's task is to explore the essence he carries and put it into practice.

## 4 Life and Legacy of Henry David Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) is one of the most popular American writers. He was an essayist, poet, activist and practical philosopher following the Transcendentalist beliefs. His most significant work is *Walden or life in the woods* and the essay *On Civil Disobedience*. Among other of his famous essays are *Walking*, *Life Without Principle*, or *Natural History on Massachusetts*.

Born in 1817 in Concord, Massachusetts, Thoreau came from a modest family whose financial situation was never an easy one. He had one brother and two sisters who all later became teachers and supported him during his studies. Thoreau's father owned a family factory on pencils which he joined for a period after his graduation from Harvard in the late 1830s. (Thoreau Society, 2015)

During the Harvard years, Thoreau became a teacher himself and together with his elder brother John, they set up a grammar school and attempted to develop progressive educational concepts. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 2018) At that time, Thoreau made acquaintance with Transcendentalists and became friends with Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose influence upon the formation of Thoreau's ideals is generally seen as crucial. Emerson greatly supported Thoreau's ambition to become a writer and encouraged him to keep journals with which Thoreau remained for the rest of his life. Other of Emerson's obvious influences on Thoreau was his literature. In particular, Emerson's essay *On Self-reliance* inspired the young writer to his famous experiment in self-sufficiency at the Walden pond nearby Concord, which would later become his best literary achievement entitled *Walden or life in the woods* (1854). (Gray, 2004, p. 139-140)

Thoreau became part of the Transcendentalist society and wrote for *the Dial*. After his brother's sudden death caused by tetanus in 1841, Henry quitted the teaching profession and went to live at Emerson's place. Soon afterwards, he decided to settle at the Walden Pond. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 2018) His retreat into the woods was partially initiated by the loss of his brother which he confessed in *Walden*, yet the main motive was the writer's desire to examine what could bring a simple life.

During the sojourn at Walden, Thoreau was arrested on one of his journeys back to the town. He refused to pay a poll tax due to which he experienced a night in prison. On that account, Thoreau wrote *On Civil Disobedience* (1849) by which he became known also as the fighter for civil rights. In the essay, he speaks for the necessity of rising up against the brutality of the state when it does not respect the democratic principles of its citizens. As he confessed, his refuse to pay the tax was a manifestation of the right to show disagreement with the state which supports slavery and acts on the detriment of the sovereignty of other states. (University of Virginia American Studies Programme, 2003-2004). One of the most famous passages of the essay is Thoreau's acknowledgement that the state has no more than its physical power to take one's freedom while he, the individual, has the freedom of mind which surpasses the physical power of the state. He claimed that: "[...] the state never intentionally confronts a man's sense, intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses. It is not armed with superior wit or honesty, but with superior physical strength" concluding that "[...] [t]here will never be a really free and enlightened State, until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly." (University of Virginia American Studies Programme, 2003-2004). *On Civil Disobedience* later inspired the renowned fighters for world peace Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. who actualized its message in the modern world's violation of the human rights.

Although always searching for contentment in the simple, ordinary and modest, Thoreau was an intellectual. He could speak more than five languages and his keen interest was literature. He drew from various sources including the ancient writings by Homer or Dante. Other of the work he read corresponded with the literature which was read and discussed in the Transcendentalist circles. The knowledge he gained from books nurtured his mind and greatly influenced the way he looked at things. For instance, in *Walden*, he often quotes from various sources and also contemplates the importance of literature for the individual growth and self-cultivation.

Thoreau was also known for the appreciation of his homeland. However, he made a couple of journeys outside the Concord area. One of such was a trip with his brother John which was later recorded in the book *A week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* on which he worked during his experiment at Walden. He also visited Cape Cod and Canada.

Thoreau's journals are the evidence of his observatory enthusiasm and skill. Later in his life, he started to work on a book mapping the local natural phenomena which he did not

finish for his early death. For his deep concern with nature, he is also seen as one of the ecologic forerunners. His legacy was an inspiration for the ecologist movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It seems that observation and the long walks were Thoreau's deepest pleasure. In *Walking*, he declared that if he did not wander properly, there would be no inspiration for him: "I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least--and it is commonly more than that--sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements" (University of Washington). He was a stranger to his contemporaries for he never married and did not achieve great career. However, what others seen as a life with no prospects, Thoreau felt as beneficial for his lifestyle gave him freedom which he wished to live absolutely. In his essay on Thoreau, Emerson described him as a nonconformist man of the finest wit and skill. He said that although Thoreau would be able to master any of professions he would settle for himself to practice, he chose instead to embrace the ordinary. "[...] [I]nstead of engineering for America, he was the captain of a huckleberry-party" (Emerson, 1982, p. 412).

## 5 Thoreau's self-reliance in *Walden*

### 5.1 Introduction to *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau

Thoreau's masterpiece *Walden, or Life in the woods* can be categorized as a philosophical and autobiographical narrative. It was first published in 1854. The book brings Thoreau's testimony of his living at the Walden pond, about a mile from Concord, between the years 1845 and 1847. At that time, Henry devoted himself to live alone in the woods in a small cabin he built on Emerson's land. His goal was to put his beliefs into practice and experience a simple and genuine life sustaining only the necessities. It is important to mention that his life at the pond was not a hermit one. He often walked to the town and had talks with people wandering around his place of stay, received visitors who were often strangers curious about his doing.

Thoreau depicts his experiment including the most practical issues from building his modest residence or an experiment with cultivation, to the critique and reflection over society. The book consists of chapters thematically entitled *Economy, Where I lived and what I lived for, Sounds, Visitors*, etc. taking place on the background of seasons of the year, symbolic to the human development. Finally, the unique framework of the book is created by the simple observations of nature which brought the author to profound awareness of life which he wished to experience for himself and the human race. Until these days, *Walden* is worldwide celebrated as one of the most influential pieces of the American literature.

### 5.2 Thoreau's confrontation with conformity

"He was a protestant à l'outrance" (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 395), Emerson wrote in his essay on Thoreau. His nonconformist stance is, in fact, the core reason and essence of the whole experiment of which the book is a record. The first prove of it, though only symbolic, is that he started his experiment on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July – on the Day of Independence. Above all, however, the decision to leave temporarily into the woods was the one reflecting his searching outside society.

I went into the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not when I came to die discover that I had not



lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner and reduce it to its lowest terms [...] (Thoreau, 1995, p. 83)

Following the lines above, it seems quite clear that Thoreau was encouraged by the highest and yet the simplest of human motives: experiencing genuine life in pursuit of fulfilment and spiritual understanding. The statement is crucial for it not only unveils the reason of the author's doing but, more importantly, it indicates his life attitude. The intense expression of willing to go further and deeper, to *the marrow of life*, a desire to live freely and independently of all what is not life, is the first mark of the author's resolute individualism. He presents himself as the one who holds power over his life by putting himself in the position of a creator. His nonconformity is mirrored in taking responsibility for the way he experiences life which makes part of the general message in *Walden*: freedom is attainable through a conscious approach to life, by taking responsibility for it and exploring possibilities.

Thoreau's nonconformist stance is furthermore observable in his reflections over society where he rejects to identify with the values of his contemporaries:

I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of. Better if they had been born in the open pasture and suckled by a wolf, that they might have seen with clearer eyes what field they were called to labor in. Who made them serfs of the soil? (Thoreau, 1995, p. 4)

It is obvious that what people usually value as a life in abundance and security, Thoreau considers unfortunate because he sees it takes the freedom from man. He observes that materialism and excessive attention focused on material well-being, in fact, devoid one of free will. In his eyes, men are enslaved by things and properties they do not necessarily need and yet keep their minds and hands wholly preoccupied to keep up the lifestyle they lead. (Thoreau, 1995, p. 4-6) Thoreau states: "It is hard to have a Southern overseer; it is worse to have a Northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself" (Thoreau, 1995, p. 6).

The major sign of nonconformity shown in *Walden* is Thoreau's commitment to practice a free life. In defence of freedom, he stands remote to the standards of everyday

living and gives evidence of what one can gain when being aware that his life can be rich and free by making the right, individual choice. His own realization of independence in *Walden* is achieved by his living by the law of simplicity.

When Emerson said that “[h]e [Thoreau] chose to be rich by making his wants few, and supplying them himself” (Emerson and Ziff, 1982, p. 396), he described the goal Thoreau pursued by his experiment in the woods. What man truly needs, Thoreau summarizes into *the necessities of life* which include Food, Clothing, Shelter and Fuel (Thoreau, 1995, p. 9). Indeed, without securing these, one is not “prepared to entertain the true problems of life with freedom and prospect of success” (Thoreau, 1995, p. 9). Consequently, he chooses to maintain only the necessities and sustain himself in the simplest way in order to experience living which does not limit one neither materially nor spiritually.

In practice, he builds a house at the low cost and sustains himself by the work of his hands. The conviction he comes to is that he does not need to work more than “[...] six weeks in a year, [...] meet all the expenses of living” (Thoreau, 1995, p. 47). Also, he rejects the necessity of eating meat and lives as a vegetarian. Another of his experiments with food supplies is a bean field he is trying to cultivate on originally barren soil. Finally, the clothing he wears is only one.

It can be stated that all of the mentioned reflections and deeds are the results of Thoreau’s nonconformity from which stems the effort to make his own way in the world full of barriers imposed by the conventional thinking, whose avenues he resists to accept as true. Most importantly, it reflects the defence of the essential values of human life – which is freedom and humanity.

### 5.3 Thoreau’s confrontation with consistency

Thoreau was born a perceiver and, therefore, what is typically present in his writings is that he looks at things from different angles. Generally, it seems that he never holds only one opinion on an issue for he is very aware of the versatility of the matter. At any time, he comes with a new reflection and gives space to development of a thought which could, in his view, bring a piece of truth.

This is noticeable especially in his contemplations over the development of society and the progressiveness which is the cause of an immense change of his era. There are several

examples where he expresses his admiration for the technical progress which, at the same time, personally denies to be advantageous and considers it distant to what is natural. One of the popular excerpts is his denial of advantage to travel by train in order to save time for what he sees behind travelling by train is the reality that it costs man's freedom in the first place.

One says to me, 'I wonder that you do not lay up money; you love to travel; you might take the cars and go to Fitchburg today and see the country. 'But I am wiser than that. I have learned that the swiftest traveller is he that goes afoot. I say to my friend, 'Suppose we try who will get there first. The distance is thirty miles; the fare ninety cents. That is almost a day's wages. I remember when wages were sixty cents a day for labourers on this very road. Well, I start now on foot, and get there before night; I have travelled at that rate by the week together. You will in the meanwhile have earned your fare, and arrive there some time tomorrow, or possibly this evening, if you are lucky enough to get a job in season. Instead of going to Fitchburg, you will be working here the greater part of the day. And so, if the railroad reached round the world, I think that I should keep ahead of you; and as for seeing the country and getting experience of that kind, I should have to cut your acquaintance altogether. (Thoreau, 1995, p. 36)

To see the contrast, it can be compared with the passage where he depicts the railroad and nature as a symbiosis of two worlds which coexist and create a new beautiful environment:

[A] fish hawk dimples the glassy surface of the pond and brings up a fish; a mink steals out of the marsh before my door and seizes a frog by the shore; the sedge is bending under the weight of the reed-birds flitting hither and thither; and for the last half-hour I have heard the rattle of railroad cars, now dying away and then reviving like the beat of a partridge, conveying travellers from Boston to the country. For I did not live so out of the world as that boy who, as I hear, was put out to a farmer in the east part of the town, but ere long ran away and came home again, quite down at the heel and homesick. He had never seen such a dull and out-of-the-way place; the folks were all gone off; why, you couldn't even hear the whistle! (Thoreau, 1995, p. 79)

Certainly, the utterance is an example of Thoreau's inconsistent expression. One could find his observations contradictory and object that there is no possibility to understand whether his attitude towards the social progress is positive or negative. At the same time, the issue can be resolved by looking at it from the point of view in which his opinions work in mutual accord. That is to say, another possibility is not to see Thoreau's attitude as

contradictory for in his arguments he obviously stands for a sincere perspective above all. It suggests that the reason of what evokes a feeling of a contradiction is, in fact, his adaptation to the new perception of reality a particular situation provides.

Similar to the case of the changing opinions on society, Thoreau claims that one does not need to eat meat and lives as a vegetarian. He opposes to the conformist view of one of his neighbours who feels certain that there is no possibility to live without meat for, the human body cannot receive the sufficient nutrition from vegetable. Thoreau gives his response explaining that he is more than sure he could live on vegetable simply because even the cattle which is alive of eating grass the whole life is able to serve man and do the hard work. (Thoreau, 1995, p. 7) In fact, it is one of Thoreau's strong convictions that there is something higher in living without meat and that it brings one to the more conscious way of being. (Thoreau, 1995, p. 146) In contrast to that, on the first pages of the same chapter in which he commented on being a vegetarian can be found the passage where he describes his experience of the hunting instinct:

I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for that wilderness which he represented. (Thoreau, 1995, p. 143)

Therefore, contemplating about eating meat, Thoreau shifts his views from the experience of the instinctive *savage* into the conclusion where he realizes he himself prefers to live without meat for he considers that life without animal food is, in a way, cleaner and elevating. In the sense of consistency, Thoreau's claims are inconsistent and contradictory to the extreme. However, in this way, the author allows himself to develop a reflection and perceive the same issue from different points of view which comes from his own experience and realization.

Finally, the significant sign of the author's changing views is his leaving from the woods. The reasons for which he began his stay in nature were to experience a simple life and find out in practice if he would be able to live self-sufficiently. Also, his goal was to perceive life more fully and understand the pursuits of society while not being directly involved. Finally, he returns back to the civilization for he attained what he wished for and does no longer find reasons to lead a life separate from people. In the conclusion of the book, he summarizes the facts he apprehended by his experiment and encourages men to pursue their

inner ideals, to seek within themselves and embrace their lives however low or ordinary they might seem. (Thoreau, p. 217-226) The crucial realization he reached by his experiment is expressed in the following line: “[...] [I]f one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavours to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.” (Thoreau, 1995, p. 219). The statement is an evidence of the completion of the mission Thoreau intended to accomplish.

Finally, Thoreau’s resistance to consistency is more than evident as he does not omit different facts and realities of one issue. He, even unconsciously, prefers to look at things, analyze or experience them only to find truth about them, despite the fact it might seem contradictory to the reader. In that way, he made obvious that one has to search and look at reality in different, though individual, angles in order to find the facts essential to himself.

## 5.4 Thoreau’s confrontation with imitation

Thoreau’s resistance to imitation is closely linked with his nonconformity. The stay itself represents an attempt for self-knowledge. Thoreau is seeking not only the truth about life but also his genuine Self. He insists on his way of getting closer to life and himself, which is the direct experience, a practice in a modest self-sufficiency. At the same time, he acknowledges his truth and lifestyle is proper to himself individually, and gives his example not to be followed but in order to inspire and arouse human desire and sense of importance to discover one’s individual principles. As he confessed:

[...] One young man of my acquaintance, who has inherited some acres, told me that he thought he should live as I did, if he *had the means*. I would not have any one adopt my mode of living on any account; for, beside that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for myself, I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead. (Thoreau, 1995, p. 48)

In one of the most essential passages of the book quoted at the beginning of the chapter dealing with Thoreau’s confrontation with conformity, Thoreau explained his reasons for the retreat into the woods, the desire to live to *the marrow of life* and to examine what was the

truth that laid behind it. In that statement he continued, settling for himself to bring people a testimony about what he found out about life. Therefore, he wanted to experience the truth in his individual way but, at the same time, did not to leave it for himself but to share it with others. Thereby, he made himself the messenger of truth which also made part of his individual purpose at the Walden pond.

[I]f it [life] proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to glorify God and enjoy him forever. (Thoreau, 1995, p. 83)

Another example of Thoreau's fidelity to identity can be found in the utterance: "Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth" (Thoreau, 1995, p. 224). It unveils the life commitment to be a seeker of truth. Devoted to his own purpose, throughout the adventure delivered in a book, he makes discovery of the man he is. In the end, the highest discovery of the individual action becomes the highest message and sense of *Walden*: "Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star" (Thoreau, 1995, p. 226).

## 6 Life and Legacy of Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was an American poet, journalist and essayist. Nowadays, his name is one of the most striking ones among the American poetry classics owing to his lifetime masterpiece *Leaves of Grass* (1855), a revolutionary book of poems written in free verse. Another notable work is *the Democratic Vistas* (1869).

He was born on Long Island in 1819 but grew up mostly in Brooklyn, New York. His large family of 9 siblings was of common origin, encountering with financial difficulties. As Reynolds stated, Whitman's father was a typical self-helping man of democratic views. (Reynolds, 1996, p. 24) Undeniably, it was one of the influences which shaped Whitman's open-mindedness and independence.

Whitman entered employment at the age of 12. Starting as a printer and schoolteacher for a short time, he became a journalist in his 20s. As a journalist, he worked for several of the important contemporary newspapers, including *the Brooklyn Daily Eagle* which he was forced to leave for his abolitionist opinions. While writing for *The Crescent* in New Orleans, he first encountered with the oppression of slaves which made him later found a *free soil* newspaper the *Brooklyn Freeman*. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 2018) At that time, his future liberalist life course was becoming more obvious.

Although he printed some of his work earlier in newspapers, as a poet, he remained unknown until 1855 when he anonymously published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* on his own costs. Although it did not receive much of attention, it reached Ralph Waldo Emerson who sent Whitman a letter where he expressed his profound admiration for the poet's work. He was convinced that Whitman would become the great figure of the American poetry. (Gray, p.) All his life, Whitman continuously revised and added new poems. Finally, there were 9 versions of the book of which the last one was entitled „The Deathbed edition“.

The poet intensely experienced the reality of death during the American Civil War (1861-5). He first took care of his wounded brother George after whose recovery he volunteered in the war camps and took care of the injured. The war left Whitman emotionally disturbed and its horrors and pain were later reflected in *Drum-Taps* published in 1865. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 2018)

Despite his lifetime lack of finances, Whitman travelled a good part of the country. Most of his life, he lived in the New York City and spent a lot of time walking and observing.

Especially, he had delight in the local cultural scene to which dominated the Broadway Theatre. He loved theatre and opera in particular. Also, he sought in literature, reading Dante, Homer, Shakespeare, Scott or Byron, as well as other Romantics.

The influence of the environment of the city, the Long Island's countryside, and literature recognizably penetrated into the imagery of *Leaves of Grass* to which Whitman devoted all his life. As Reynolds writes, much impression on him made his early experiences of the Quaker and Methodist oratory as well as Walter Scott's ancient bardic writing style. (Reynolds, 1996, 39-40). These, among other, contributed to the poet's use of prophetic voice and conception of poem as a song which characterized his early poems such as *Starting from Paumanok* and *Song of Myself*.

The original edition of *Leaves* consisted of 12 untitled poems, including the most famous such as later called *Song of Myself*, *I Sing the Body Electric* or *The Sleepers*. Other of the renowned poems are e.g.: *Song of the Road*, *Goodbye My Fancy* or *Passage to India*. The poems *When the Lilacs in the Dooryard Bloomed* and *O Captain My Captain* were written in homage of the president Abraham Lincoln who was assassinated in 1865.

Whitman introduced the wholly new form of writing to the world of literature. He broke with the conventional notions of poetry and wrote in free verse of long descriptive passages, using the American language with its typical expressiveness and rhythm by which he defined the characteristics of the American world. His work was revolutionary and unique not only for its form, language and style, but also for its all-embracing themes.

The main motives in his poetry are individuality, love (both in the physical and spiritual sense), equality and divinity of all. Specifically, it includes sexual imagery, celebration and worship of nature, man and soul, the insight into lives of individual Americans (esp. *Song of Myself*), egalitarian principles – most significantly towards women and black people, and many other. In a sense, Whitman attempted to include the whole America into his work. To him, “America was the greatest poem“ and he profoundly believed in its potential. With a regard to that, this belief was broadly developed in his work *Democratic Vistas*.

The humanity and equality which *Leaves of grass* promoted are the reason for which he is by many called a democrat, pantheist or humanist. In his essay on Whitman, Henry James called the poet an anarchist and declared that “Whitman is an incarnation of the modern man, of whom thus far we have only had intimations. Modern life has yet not begun” (James,



p. 107). The legacy Whitman brought to the world with an absolute devotion draws attention to the present time and was the subject of myriads of analysis and critiques. Still, as James argues in the essay, his personality and message points to the future to be fully appreciated and understood.

## 7 Whitman's self-reliance in *Song of Myself*

### 7.1 Introduction to *Song of Myself*

The longest of Whitman's poems, *Song of Myself* (1855), makes part of his lifetime work *Leaves of Grass* (1855). As well as the book itself, it is celebrated as the jewel of the American poetry. Consistent with the whole masterpiece, it is written in a free verse. It is distinctive especially for the poet's bardic and prophetic voice. As the title suggests, individualism is the core feature of the poem. Whitman here incarnates both his individual identity of Walt Whitman and the universal Self of Man. The individuality is experienced and celebrated both in physical (Body) and spiritual (Soul) dimension equally. With a reference to the previous chapter, the overall motives of *Leaves of Grass* are most embodied by *Song of Myself*. Love, equality, and celebration of the human being, nature and Existence underlay the poem which is an ode on being and America and its people.

### 7.2 Whitman's confrontation with conformity

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,  
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

Whitman's resistance to conformity is obvious from the poem's form itself, the used means of expression, etc. The purpose of this thesis, however, is to concentrate on the content. In this respect, it is evident from the title that the *Me* is what the author's focused on. From the broadest perspective, his nonconformity is expressed by his resolute commitment to embody the strong individual. The poem is an attempt to manifest the power of the author's individuality, symbolizing the power of individuality in the universal sense, in every possible way.

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch'd from,  
The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,  
This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds.  
(Whitman, 2000)

In essence, Whitman's nonconformity can be described with one word, which is all-inclusiveness. What cannot be omitted is that the inclusiveness he advocates is equivalent to the principle of equality which penetrates the whole poem. The first excerpt shows how Whitman places himself in the centre of action. The second excerpt proves that the poet embodies a personality of multi-identity which enables him to include and bear everything he perceives. In summary, he identifies with the world in and around him and celebrates all in equal way. Celebration is, in Whitman's expression, the main tool of democratization of all.

1) I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,  
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,  
(...)  
I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,  
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man,  
And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men.  
(Whitman, 2000, p. 41 )

2) The young mechanic is closest to me, he knows me well,  
The woodman that takes his axe and jug with him shall take me with him all day,  
The farm-boy ploughing in the field feels good at the sound of my voice,  
In vessels that sail my words sail, I go with fishermen and seamen and love them.  
(Whitman, 2000, p. 74)

Furthermore, the evidence of Whitman's nonconformity is his egalitarianism by which he manifests the all-embracing attitude towards what society classifies as good or bad. He puts the low and the noble aside and leads it towards assimilation. Hereby, he demonstrates the same degree of importance of all that exists and shows there is not one without the other as everything makes part of one Existence and, therefore, should not be excluded or overlooked. In that way, he makes himself a liberator of all.

This is the meal equally set, this the meat for natural hunger,  
It is for the wicked just the same as the righteous, I make appointments with all,  
I will not have a single person slighted or left away,  
The kept-woman, sponger, thief, are hereby invited,  
The heavy-lipp'd slave is invited, the venerealee is invited;

There shall be no difference between them and the rest.  
(Whitman, 2000, p. 39)

Finally, the last analyzed feature of the poet's nonconformity which also proceeds from the inclusiveness are the themes whose presence in poetry was in his own times perceived as controversial and scandalous. Namely, the exaltation of the physical, often with sexual undertone, appears in the poem as well as the reverent perception of woman and black people. As an accurate example of this may serve the following lines in which the author expresses his open and affectionate approach towards a black man. He sees him as a strong and divine human being representing the power proper to any individual.

The negro holds firmly the reins of his four horses, the block swags underneath on its tied-over chain,  
The negro that drives the long dray of the stone-yard, steady and tall he stands pois'd on one leg on the string-piece,  
His blue shirt exposes his ample neck and breast and loosens over his hip-band,  
His glance is calm and commanding, he tosses the slouch of his hat away from his forehead,  
The sun falls on his crispy hair and mustache, falls on the black of his polish'd and perfect limbs.  
I behold the picturesque giant and love him.  
(...)  
(Whitman, 2000, p. 32-33)

### 7.3 Whitman's confrontation with consistency

Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)  
(Whitman, 2000, p. 77)

The poet's resistance to consistency often based on contradiction is exclusively conscious and deliberate. First, it can be observed in relation to the previously stated inclusive and egalitarian attitude, by which he does not want to leave anything unnoticed or less significant and often gives a dualist sense to his vision. He considers everything divine in the

same way which, naturally, evokes inconsistency. Ultimately, Whitman's perception of reality is based on the principle of duality and diversity. In order to express his vision, he always goes with one to join the contrasting at the same time. He claims: „Clear and sweet is my soul and clear and sweet is not my soul“, which is the typical example of the unifying duality he apprehends. The following stanzas illustrate the inconsistency by which Whitman unifies the opposite and different, and gives them equal meaning.

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,  
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,  
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,  
Stuff'd with the stuff that is coarse and stuff'd with the stuff that is fine,  
One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and the largest the same,  
A Southerner soon as a Northerner, [...]

[...] [...] [...]

A learner with the simplest, a teacher of the thoughtfulest,  
A novice beginning yet experiment of myriads of seasons,  
Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion,  
A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker,  
Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.

I resist any thing better than my own diversity, [...]

(Whitman, 2000, p. 37-38)

With a regard to the findings, it can be concluded that Whitman extremely redefines the meaning of consistency. In his view, the whole Existence is consistent in a sense that none of the existing can be excluded. In the conscious perception of all, he manifests diversity full of contrasts as a natural state. Accepting nature, he demonstrates that the order is found in the chaos and that unity is created by every piece of the existing.

## 7.4 Whitman's confrontation with imitation

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,  
Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding,  
No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them,  
No more modest than immodest.  
(Whitman, 2000, p. 43)

From the analysis of the preceding two chapters, it can be deduced that Whitman absolutely denies even the possibility of imitation for he emphasises that the nature of all is individual. As an individual, Whitman presents himself as the messenger and source of all freedom. He assigns to himself to create the poem in which his individuality emanates, and absorbs the individuality of the surrounding world and all men only to emphasize that everything is individual and sacred. He identifies with the foreign but to encompass it and bring into consciousness but remains Walt Whitman. This can be observed in the following stanza:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.  
(Whitman, 2000, p. 22)

The final observation made on the effect of Whitman's inclusiveness is that in its ultimate sense, he uses imitation to embrace individuality of other people. He becomes them by which he also emphasises his all-embracing nature and connectedness with all. Identical with the case of consistency, Whitman reverses the meaning of imitation and uses it intentionally to indicate the relation linking all men into One. He demonstrates that everything is unique and has its own nature which the reader obtains through the poet's Self.

As in the case of the individual conception of consistency, Whitman gives another meaning to imitation and uses it as an element which, in fact, supports his own identity of the one delivering the message about individuality and equilibrium. His identity, of which he is aware, is the all-embracing Self, which, however, still lets himself be known as the individual Walt Whitman, who "[h]arbour[s] for good or bad, permit[s] to speak at every hazard, Nature

without check with original energy (...)”. (Whitman, 2000, p. 23) With a regard to that, Whitman embodies a human who embraces and exposes his individual potential.

# Conclusion

The main idea of Emerson's concept of individualism was that in the self-awareness, man was able to apprehend the universal principles of life and acknowledge thus his inner independence and innate wisdom to which he had access through his intuitive perception. In the confrontation with society, Emerson defined the core social principles as conformity, consistency and imitation and considered them the main obstacles of freedom of the individual. In contrast to that, self-reliance was presented as the ability to confront with the pressures of the social reality and to pursue and manifest the individual truth.

Thoreau's individual experiment at Walden was the practical demonstration of self-reliance. In pursuit of the spiritual knowledge and a higher experience of life, he decided to live alone and sustain himself in the simplest way which was a characteristic feature of his resistance to conformity. His nonconformity stemmed from the fact that he did not find the lifestyle of his contemporaries true and decided to follow the path of his own. In his reflections, he also proved to be inconsistent and contradictory on a behalf of examining reality from different points of view which enabled him to be reach his individual truths and perception. His adaptation to the newly discovered truths enriched him and finally made him return to the civilization. Furthermore, he confidently manifested the self-confidence about his individual purposes and found his way of living the most suitable for himself. In general, the experiment brought him to self-knowledge and discovery of the individual spiritual truths.

In the case of *Song of Myself*, Whitman inhabited an idea of a strong and self-aware individual by which he wanted to manifest the human independence. The characteristic feature of his nonconformity was that he openly expressed the belief in his potential and strength, including both Body and Soul. As a nonconformist, he also refused to perceive reality differently than as equal and for that reason he included every part of Existence into his all-perceiving confession. This was also the reason for which he decided to be inconsistent for, in his view, the true consistency and union proceeded from the diversity of things where the good was not separate from the bad. Finally, the human who divinized, democratized and celebrated life was the commitment he pursued and took for his identity. In the way of his manifestation, he denied there would exist something different than original.

With a regard to the previously stated, it can be concluded that the principles of individualism which Emerson described, were in the case of both Thoreau and Whitman confirmed, for their self-reliance was the reason of their individual expression and perception of life and truth.



Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates that individualism according to Emerson's notion brings man to the recognition of the highest value: humanity.

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