

**:: STRUCTURE ::****6.0 Objective****6.1 Introduction to Emerson****6.2 Transcendentalism and Emerson**

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**6.0 OBJECTIVE**

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The present chapter attempts to discuss

- Philosophy of transcendentalism and its connection to Emerson
- Introduction to Emerson's Works
- Emerson's contribution in the field of essay writing with special attention to the essay Gift

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**6.1 INTRODUCTION TO EMERSON**

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Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American poet, essayist, and philosopher, was born on May 25, 1803, in Boston. Thomas Carlyle and Emerson became close friends during Emerson's visit to Europe, and this is evident in the way that Emerson's philosophy was shaped by Carlyle's vehement criticisms of materialism and hypocrisy, his mistrust of democracy, and his intensely romantic conviction in the power of the individual. He settled down at Concord, Massachusetts after returning to England and quickly earned the

nickname “The Sage of Concord”. He rose to prominence as the face of the American literary and philosophical movement known as transcendentalism, which had its epicentre in New England throughout 19<sup>th</sup> century, was an opposition to scientific rationalism. Emerson became popular with his first book *Nature* published in the year 1836 which explains his philosophy of transcendentalism. Some notable works of Emerson are *Essays, First and Second Series* (1841, 1844), *Poems* (1847), *Representative Men* (1850), *The Conduct of Life* (1860) and *English Traits* (1865). He is well-known for his lectures such as *The American Scholar* (1837) and *The Divinity School Address*. Discussing about Emerson’s intellectual contribution, Underwood writes, “The intellectual life of Emerson for nearly half a century has affected educated men with an influence that is immeasurable ; he is " the Columbus of modern thought." Since Lord Bacon, there has not been another writer whose resources were so wholly in himself. He belongs with the three or four philosophic minds of the first order, born of the Anglo-Saxon race” (2).

In the next unit, we will understand Emerson’s ideas on transcendentalism and how they get reflected in his literary works.

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## **6.2 EMERSON AND TRANSCENDENTALISM**

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It is a philosophical and literary movement, based in Concord and Boston, that had a significant impact on New England's intellectual and cultural life from 1836 until shortly before the Civil War. The Transcendental Club was founded in 1836 by a group of Unitarian thinkers that included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, Frederick Henry Hedge, W. E. and W. H. Channing, Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, George Ripley, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Thoreau, and Jones Very. Most of their early works got published in *The Dial*, a quarterly periodical which was edited by Emerson for two years 1842 to 1844. It is notable that the roots of this philosophy are in post-Kantian idealism and Romanticism. Transcendentalists were opposed to rigid rationalism, the John Locke school of eighteenth-century empirical philosophy, which derived all knowledge from sense impressions, highly formalised religion, particularly the Calvinist orthodoxy of New England, and the social conformity, materialism, and commercialism that they observed becoming more and more prevalent in American life. Going against materialist philosophy, Emerson and other transcendentalists believed in the validity of a mode of knowledge based in feeling and intuition and a resulting tendency to accept what, to logical reasoning, might seem contradictions; an ethics of individualism that stressed self-trust, self-reliance, and self-sufficiency; a turn away from modern society, with its getting and spending, to the scenes and objects of the natural world. According to Emerson, everyone should find “an original relation to the universe”. Now having some idea of transcendentalism

philosophy, in the next unit, we will discuss about Emerson's literary works in brief.

• **Check Your Progress: 1**

**Q.1 Answer the following questions.**

1. What is transcendentalism?

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2. Who are the major figures of transcendental philosophy?

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3. What are Emerson's ideas about nature?

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**6.3 EMERSON AS ESSAYIST**

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While talking about Emerson's literary career, one has to taken into consideration both the sides of him: as a philosopher and as an author. Underwood argues, "when Emerson is called philosopher and poet, both terms need definition. In his first essay on " Nature," in the chapter entitled " Idealism," is a passage that helps us to a correct perception of the man: " While thus the poet animates Nature with his thoughts, he differs from the philosopher only herein, that one proposes Beauty as his main end; the other Truth. . . . The true philosopher and the true poet are one; and a beauty which is truth, and a truth which is beauty, is the aim of both." Although discussing Emerson's poetry collection would be highly intriguing, we must limit our discussion to essays in this instance.

*Representative Men*, one of his finest book is a collection of character studies, his collection of seven lectures, later on published as a book of Essays. It is sharply contrasted and profoundly provocative. The pieces of Emerson that are collectively referred to as "The Conduct of Life" were written while he was at his best. The final of these, "Illusions," was published in November 1857's first issue of "The Atlantic Monthly." In 1870, a great new book titled "Society and Solitude" was published.

"Letters and Social Aims," the final volume in the series, was published in 1875. These three books cover issues of greater public interest and are replete with pertinent anecdotes from history and biography, despite their lighter tone and lack of fervour. The earlier writings display more vivid impressions of natural objects and emphasizes cognition and imagination. (Underwood 491-92). Some of the recurring themes presented in his essays are nature and education, morality, and power. The next unit is a discussion on specific essay called Gift.

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## 6.4 Gift by Emerson

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The present essay is taken from Ralph Waldo Emerson's book *Essays: Second Series* published in the year 1844. Here Emerson connects the materialistic concept of gift and the abstract concept of love.

Giving gift to somebody and receiving gifts from somebody are very common to us in every society however Emerson's essay *Gift* provides a new angle to this common process. The essay which starts with a quotation:

Gifts of one who loved me,--  
'T was high time they came;  
When he ceased to love me,  
Time they stopped for shame

This quote suggests the importance of love in human life as when love is present in the life, gifts do come but as soon as love disappear, the gifts also ceased as it's a shameful for the giver of the gift. Talking about the confusion related the selection of gifts, Emerson believes that sometime selection of the gift is so time taking that we miss the opportunity. This quotation makes a strong case for the value of love in human life. When love is there, presents do arrive, but as soon as love leaves, the gifts stop as it is embarrassing for the one who gave them. Speaking of the difficulty around present selection, Emerson thinks that occasionally choosing a gift takes so much time that we lose the opportunity or the occasion.

According to Emerson flowers and fruits are two things which come to our mind very obviously when we talk about gifts. Let's understand his quote from the essay:

Men use to tell us that we love flattery, even though we are not deceived by it, because it shows that we are of importance enough to be courted. Something like that pleasure, the flowers give us: ...Fruits are acceptable gifts because they are the flower of commodities, and admit of fantastic values being attached to them. If a man should send to me to come a hundred miles to visit him, and should set before me a basket of fine summerfruit, I should think there was some proportion between the labor and the reward.

He claims that flowers represent nature's loftiest and most endearing gifts. Through their astounding beauty and diversity, they seduce the

imagination. When nature shows us its darker side, a bloom will occasionally appear out of the shadows, bringing with it a kind, youthful, and alluring visage. Flowers are unquestionably carriers of love and supreme creativity. They give us a sense of well-being, adoration, desire, and importance. Flowers subtly congratulate us. They make us happy by implying who we are referring to. According to Emerson, fruits are also adorable gifts just as flowers. Fruits as gifts give a feeling of fulfilment. Emerson illustrates his point with an example, saying that if a fruit grower carried a basket of fruit on his back and walked an unusually long distance to present it to a friend, the effort expended in moving the fruit and the giver's love for the recipient would have increased his sense of importance proportionately.

He is against the mentality of purchasing gifts without taking into consideration the characteristic of gift receiver because what is more valuable than a monetary or materialist value is a personal sentiment or sacrifice attached to that gift. He brings in lots of examples to prove his statement. He states, "The only gift is a portion of thyself...the poet brings his poem; the shepherd his lamb; the farmer, corn; the miner, a gem; the sailor, coral and shells; the painter, his picture; the girl, a handkerchief of her own sewing". He firmly holds the opinion that highly valued materialist things might be cold, lifeless and without any significance.

Emerson also makes us aware of the hidden risk of the "gifting" culture. According to him, giving or receiving gifts is a delicate task that calls for cautious judgement. A self-respecting man typically dislikes receiving presents since they prefer to be self-sufficient and, as a result, have a tendency to become angry and bitter towards the gift-giver. Gifts that are given out of true, selfless love are the only ones that are appreciated. Any gift that is given with love can be accepted, but when someone gives a gift with condescension, the recipient feels hurt and embarrassed and may express his disapproval in an overt manner because they feel obligated. He also believes that sometimes 'a small gift' makes the receiver annoyed and instead of saying "thank you," he can even be enraged by the gift. Emerson advises readers to avoid such avaricious, unappreciative, and cruel persons.

Going towards the ending of the essay, a reader gets the idea that the motive of Emerson's discussion is his idea of love. Emerson believes that love is universally desired and all-encompassing. He says, "...the majesty of love, which is the genius and god of gifts, and to whom we must not affect to prescribe". Value of love cannot be measured as Emerson writes:

I find that I am not much to you; you do not need me; you do not feel me; then am I thrust out of doors, though you proffer me house and lands. No service are of any value, but only likeness.

He believes that one should not accept any present, regardless of size or cost, when the charm of love is absent. In fact, it is not the material value or the volume of the gift that matters; what makes a gift a gift is the love with which it is wrapped.

• **Check Your Progress: 2**

**True or False**

1. Flowers and fruits are considered as less valuable than stones and jewels.
2. According to Emerson, gifts should be suitable to the status of the receiver.
3. Personal emotions are more valuable than money in giving gifts.
4. The only gift is a portion of thyself means you yourself are the gift of god.

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**6.5 KEY WORDS**

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Transcendentalism, Romanticism,

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**6.6 SUGGESTED READINGS**

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- A Glossary of Literary Terms by M.H.Abrams
- Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory by J.A.Cuddon
- The Cambridge companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson Edited by Joel Porte and Sandra Morris

**Answers:**

Check Your Progress: 2

- 1) false
- 2) false
- 3) true
- 4) false