CHAPTER – II
SOCIAL AND LITERARY MILIEU
America in the nineteenth century witnessed many significant changes in various ways. It was a period in which many social and literary changes were taking place in America. No other period in the history of American literature is as rich and significant as this period. Therefore, this period was called as the American renaissance by many critics. The ideals that strengthen America into a strong nation came forth. It was a period marked by significant growth in American literature. This rich literary age saw the birth of one of the most important literary figure of America, namely Ralph Waldo Emerson. American literary power was at its peak during this time. For Walt Whitman, the famous American poet, this phenomenon began with Emerson:

America of the future, in her long train of poets and writers, while knowing more vehement and luxuriant ones, will, I think, acknowledge nothing nearer this man, the actual beginner of the whole procession.
In 1941, F.O. Mathiessen completed a groundbreaking study of the major writers of the nineteenth century American literature. He studied Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman and their culture. However, he could find no title to describe the extraordinary episode he had examined. His friend and student, Harry Levin, proposed ‘American Renaissance’ and that is what Mathiessen finally called his study:

The term is, however, imperfect, this was not a rebirth but a new beginning, as Emerson insisted and as Mathiessen himself said, observing that the period signaled America’s coming to its first maturity and affirming its rightful heritage in the whole expanse of art and culture.²

This period is also regarded as the American equivalent of the Elizabethan Age of England. In this period, various writers express their artistic genius through some very famous and important works.

‘The age of the first person Singular’ was Emerson’s name for the key period in American culture he so gladly announced and so proudly celebrated.³ This age has been called by many names by different critics and writers. During this age, various writers set forth their forceful ideas and attitudes on different aspects of human life like religion, politics, economics, democracy, human nature and common man, industry, slavery, the civil war, science. During this period, many important events took place in
America. The Romantic Movement, which originated in Germany spread to England, France and reached America around the year 1820. So this Romanticism coincided with the period of national expansion and the discovery of a distinctive American voice in America.

Most of the writers during this period were from New England. Therefore, New England influenced the literary work of America. It was mainly the renaissance of New England. Many factors were responsible for this. One of the main factors responsible for this is that the Americans began to visit Europe and bring back new books and ideas:

The seeds of Romanticism, transplanted from Europe and germinated in a soil already well fertilized by the traditional puritan respect for the life of the mind, eventually flowered into the so-called New England Renaissance.4

So, romantic ideas started to make its influence on art. According to Romantics, art can only express the universal truth. ‘The Romantics underscored the importance of expressive art for the individual and the society.’5 In his essay “The Poet”, Ralph Waldo Emerson asserts:

For all men live by truth, and stand in need of expression. In love, in art, in avarice, in politics, in labour, in games,
we study to culture our painful secret. The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression.\textsuperscript{6}

Romanticism, thus, plays a very important role in the development of American literature of the nineteenth century. Another very important theme for the American Romantics was the development of the self. For the Romantics, self and nature were one. Their idea of self was not selfishness but self-awareness, which would eventually lead to self-realization or self-expression. For more than half a century, from the 1830s until the end of the century, Boston rather than New York was the most vital cultural centre in the United States’ political and social front.

The Romantic spirit suited the American democracy; ‘It stressed individualism, affirmed the value of the common person, and looked to the inspired imagination for its aesthetic and ethical values.’\textsuperscript{7} This period also saw the growth of democracy in America. During that time, there were two major political parties in the United States, the Whigs and the Democrats. Conservative, rich people were generally with the Whigs, whereas liberal men of little or no property were with the Democrats. The election of Andrew Jackson of Tennessee by Democrats in 1828 is one of the great landmarks in the evolution of American democracy. During this Jacksonian period, government in America became more democratic in outlook. Because of this growing democracy, state constitutions were liberal. Religious tests and prosperity qualifications for office was removed during that time. Everyman got the right to vote in election. When Emerson, one of the greatest writers of this period, in \textit{The American Scholar},
hailed as one of the “auspicious signs” the exploring and poetizing of “the near, the
low, the common,” he was thinking particularly of the English Romantic poets.

The revolution in this Jacksonian period affected the entire country but the
industrial revolution was confined largely to the Northern states. The effects of this
revolution became especially important in New England. After the war of 1812,
business capital and initiative in New England diverted from commerce to
manufacturing. There was abundance of waterpower and skilled labour and this
guaranteed the success of the factory system. About 1820, the factory village became a
conspicuous feature. The nation paused on the threshold of its geographical expansion
westward, a movement, which remained unmatched in its speed and thoroughness in
the history of man. These changes in American culture were equivalent to those of
European culture of the period. The winds of change whipped through the worlds of
science, politics, and virtually every other aspect of western life, including literature
and philosophy. This period was full of hopes and visions.

In the social front, there was a controversy over Negro slavery in the South and
the tragic climax of the civil war. The reactions of different writers of the age to this
problem of slavery were different. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, one of the famous
poet of nineteenth century America was mildly responsive to the problem. His
sentiments regarding slavery were broadly and sincerely humanitarian. He believed that
slavery was a great evil. However, he was not active in reform and always tries to stay
away from controversy. James Russel Lowell, the essayist was much more vocal and
was vigorously against slavery. He on the other hand enjoyed being in the thick of the fray. He opposed the Mexican war. Initially he was in favor of separation but afterwards he directed his best poetical effort towards reunion. David Thoreau on the other hand had the rare personal courage to carry his convictions to their logical conclusions. He refused to pay taxes to the government, which allowed slavery. He had the courage and the conviction to defy the civil law of the time. He took a very bold and individualistic stand in the matter of slavery.

Emerson was more amenable to laws and conventions in practice. He does not have the boldness and crusading spirit of Thoreau. It was only after 1850, that he spoke openly against slavery. The high point of his participation came when he read the “Boston Hymns” at a meeting to celebrate the Emancipation proclamation on January 1, 1863. This speech delivered in Boston:

Had a wide audience and undoubtedly helped to silence the critics and cement public opinion behind Lincoln.9

The involvement of the Alcotts and Thoreau with antislavery groups like Boston Female Anti-slavery Society during the 1830’s, in addition to Lidian Emerson’s antislavery support make the discussions of slavery inevitable to Emerson also.

America during this century was in a boom period. The rapidity and seriousness of the culture’s transitions are perhaps most evident in the social and political changes of this volatile period. Jacksonian America saw the vested interests of
the old Federalists and business-oriented Whigs challenged by the raw, husky assertions of the common men. The labouring class made their initial moves toward unionization, and more and more of them secured the franchise. The industrial revolution with its technology gained momentum as the frontier loomed larger and more attractive and cities began to grow rapidly. Change and growth were the keynotes as old alliances dissolved and new ones formed. Brian Harding writes:

During this period, natural science advanced with remarkable rapidity. There was a diffusion of interest through the whole population and to a bursting of the bounds of knowledge about nature and society.10

In England, Sir Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1830) established the antiquity of the earth and the gradual evolution of its surface. Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859) presented the theory of the evolution of man through a process of natural selection. In New England as well as elsewhere in America, scientific activity in all the fields kept pace with developments in the old world. Benjamin Silliman at Yale published his *Elements of Chemistry* in 1838. Aba Gray at Harvard brought out a notable survey of Botany in 1847. Louis Agassiz of Switzerland began in 1846 a distinguished career at Harvard in the field of Comparative Zoology. The Harvard Astronomical Observatory in 1846 was equipped with the world’s largest telescope. The American Association for the Advancement of Science established in Boston in 1847. All the writers of America particularly the New England writers were aware of all these scientific developments. The writings of these writers reflect, in different ways
and degrees, the influence of the new facts and the new theories of experimental Science.

Emerson greeted the scientific movement with enthusiasm. His scientific readings were remarkably wide and included among other things the works of Newton, Buffon, Lamarck, Lyell, Agassiz and Darwin. However, Emerson was not himself a scientist, nor was he interested in science for its own sake. The moral and spiritual implications of the scientific facts and theories affect Emerson’s mind. He liked to draw illustrations of spiritual truth from physical phenomena. Moreover he was delighted by the doctrine of evolution. Thoreau’s relation to science was much more intimate than Emerson’s concept of science. He was interested in nature for its own sake as well as for its transcendental meanings.

This period was a period of great productivity in the field of literature also. Many critics and writers have called it the age of literary fulfillment. Various literary trends and ideas get their finest expression during this age. For the reader of today, this period was the time of the poem, the essay, the questing travel tale, and the novel emergence in America. We can also add Poe’s work of the previous two decades, which is the emergence of modern short story. However, this Renaissance was almost restricted to the areas in which Unitarianism made its impact over Calvinism. It was a flowering of eastern Massachusetts rather than of New England as a whole. However, this age was the New England Renaissance in the history of American literature. Therefore:
The New England writers of this period fall fairly clearly into two groups: The radicals who endeavoured to break completely with the past and the conservatives who remained closer to the Brahmin tradition of the old mercantile families and were mostly men of scholarship rather than of creative originality.11

So, the main literary figures of the period are W.H. Longfellow, J.R. Lowell, W. Holmes, R.W. Emerson, D. Thoreau, N. Hawthorne, H. Melville, J.P. Kennedy, W.G. Simms, W. Whitman, Margaret Fuller and Harriet Beecher Stowe. All these writers produced real gems in different spheres of American letters. However, the main important writers of this period were Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne and Melville. During this American Renaissance, both foreign and domestic influences, old and new, were notable. This age had key women writers, of whom, Margaret Fuller and Harriet Beecher Stowe, author not only of Uncle Tom’s Cabin but also of vivid records of New England life, were most notable. Margaret Fuller was the most powerful mind of the era’s feminist movement.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was an important literary figure of this era. His Nature (1836) with its repudiation of the past and the retrospective age followed by his oration The American Scholar for many people serves as the nation’s true declaration of literary independence. In Representative Man, one of his most famous essays, he writes:
There is a moment in the history of every nation, when, proceeding out of this brute youth, the perceptive powers reach their ripeness and have not yet become microscopic: … That is the moment of adult health, the culmination of power.¹²

In this, Emerson was acknowledging, in, or exhorting from, American thought. He was the first wholly American writer, in the sense that he summed up and expressed in the essays and poems what was the logical basis of American life and American political action from the landing at Plymouth Rock to the framing of the constitution. His wisdom was the wisdom of American life. The dominant tone in Emerson was his celebration of the positive element. This is a note that predominates in Thoreau, Whitman and many other writers of this era. Emerson published all his works in this era. His *Nature* came out in 1836, then his two series of essays in 1841 and 1844 followed by his *Representative Men* in 1850, *English Traits* in 1856, *The Conduct of Life* in 1860, *Society and Solitude* in 1870. He gave his most important address *The American Scholar* in 1837 followed by *The Divinity School Address* in 1838 and the lecture on *The Natural History of the Intellect* in 1870.

Another important literary figure of this era was Henry Thoreau. Like Emerson, he was also a transcendentalist. He was a very active member of the Transcendental club and produced many articles in the transcendental journal *Dial*. Thoreau believed that a man’s faith should determine his works. He sincerely believed that man could know the reality, if he whole-heartedly strives after it. One can find Thoreau’s
transcendentalist ideas in his contributions to the *Dial*. Like Emerson, he also kept records of his journal entries. His famous work *Walden* is about his experiences in Walden Pond. It is his spiritual biography. Thoreau’s brilliant account of his life in the woods in Walden has become an essential American book. This book is not only central to the canon of nineteenth-century American, but also a founding text for the modern environmental movement. This book also serves as an example of the transcendentalists, who were involved in establishing new alternatives in American political and economic system. Thoreau felt spiritual force at work everywhere; nature to him was another name for divinity. He had a marvelous intuitive power, which helped him largely, to build up a strong philosophy of the Self. He also believed in Emerson’s philosophy of ‘Self’ and ‘Self-reliance.’ Thoreau himself saw his two-year adventure on the Pond’s shore as a westward quest for the Emerson’s Self:

   I went to 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.13

The only one of the transcendentalists actually born in Concord, Thoreau, after a ministerial training, chose a life of what he called ‘excursions’ – school teacher, surveyor, handyman, student of nature. His journals (fourteen volumes, 1906, Posthumous), his letters and verses, articles and speeches, and his two published books, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack rivers*(1849) and *Walden*(1854), represented the epitome of Emerson’s independence. He was an abolitionist and spoke out boldly
against the government and its policies regarding slavery. The transcendental ideals bought Emerson close to Thoreau. Thoreau, Emerson and other members of the Transcendental club frequently met and edited the magazine *Dial* together.

Another very important voice in nineteenth century American literature was Herman Melville. He was a contemporary of Emerson and Thoreau and he contributed his share to the American literature of that period. He was a central figure of American writing prior to the civil war. However, unlike Poe or Hawthorne, he survived the war. The civil war inspired his first book of poems, *Battle-pieces and Aspects of War* (1866). He wrote further volumes in verse *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage to the Holy Land* (1876), about his ceaseless quest for faith; *John Marr and other Sailors* (1888) and *Timolean* (1891), privately printed in editions of twenty-five copies. He published his first book, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* in 1846 after his experience at Marquers Islands in the Pacific. Again, his experience is recounted in *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847). He also published *Mandi* in 1849.

However, the most important work, which made him a prominent novelist of this age, is *Moby-Dick*. It is one of the best American novels, which we have had. It came out during the months of his close association with Hawthorne. He dedicated the book to Hawthorne. *Moby Dick* is a famous American novel, about the dangers of “craving after the indefinite.”[^14] He challenges Emerson’s optimistic idea that humans can understand nature. Melville always makes his distance from Emerson. He does not agree with the optimistic view of Emerson. So, “where Emerson assumed a beneficent
energy in the world. Melville felt uncertainty and frustration.” Richard Rutland and Malcolm Bradbury in their book *From Puritanism to post-modernism* wrote about the relationship between Melville and Emerson. In this book Melville wrote to Evert Duyckinck, his friend and mentor, about Emerson. He wrote:

Nay, I do not oscillate in Emerson’s rainbow, but prefer rather to hang myself in mine own hatter than swing in any other man’s swing. Yet I think Emerson is more than a brilliant fellow. Be his stuff begged, borrowed, or stolen, or of his own domestic manufacture he is an uncommon man. Swear … This I see in Mr. Emerson. And frankly, for the sake of the argument, let us call him a fool; then had I rather be a fool then a wise man.16

He also describes Emerson as the Plato who talks through his nose.

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), also produced some very important works during this period. Critics often called him the founder of the psychological novel in America. Both he and Melville were concerned with the darker side of human life. Both accepted the reality of the existence of evil in the world, both wrote tragedies of mind and soul. He published an early gothic novel, *Fanshawe* in 1828. He wrote many tales, and published anonymously in women magazines. His *Twice-told Tales* (1837) brought him out of obscurity. After his marriage, he published *Moeses* from an Old Mange in 1846. However, the most important and successful work of Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, came out in 1851.
Hawthorne distrusted the emphasis of the Transcendentalists on self-reliance, individualism and unlike them accepted evil as an active force in life. He recognized the differences in temperament and philosophy between him and Emerson. According to him, individualism is a form of egotism, which is the root of all evils, which eventually leads men to isolation. Therefore:

While Emerson may be said to have retained the puritan belief in divine grace while repudiating original sin, Hawthorne saw human beings as sinners with little hope of grace.\(^{17}\)

Both ‘Hawthorne and Melville are skeptical writes where we find the darkened face of transcendentalism in their writings: ‘They regarded Transcendentalism as the expression of a shallow and unrealistic optimism’.\(^{18}\) He shared very contrasting views with Emerson. So, Emerson’s poet was to be a seer, seeking a clear sign; but Hawthorne’s artist is a culture of conscious contradictions, seeking and creating oppositions. Hawthorne’s other work; *The House of the Seven Gables* was published in 1851.

Nineteenth century America saw the emergence of another important writer who left his imprint in the history of American literature as well as in the history of America. This great man was Walt Whitman whose real name was Walter Whitman. He was a real American poet for America. Most of his writings were mainly poetry and he was the poet of the newborn American democracy. With the works of Whitman,
there was a return of the optimistic tone of the transcendentalist. The works of Hawthorne and Melville have negated these positive attitudes of Whitman.

Whitman introduced a very new trend and subject of poetry in America. Like Emerson and Thoreau, he was also a transcendentalist. However, ‘one thing that divided him decisively with the transcendentalists was his open-minded opinion of Sex and Amativeness.’

Like Emerson, he also celebrated ‘Self’. In his famous poem ‘Song of Myself’, he begins with the line:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I celebrate myself} \\
\text{Shall I pray? Shall I venerate and be} \\
\text{Ceremonious?}
\end{align*}
\]

Emerson’s famous line of ‘Trust Thyself’ and his concepts of self-reliance have already celebrated the concept of ‘Self’ in America. Moreover, Whitman’s celebration of ‘Self’ or the ‘I’ in *Leaves of Grass* makes it a very important part of the American literature. According to Thoreau, this voice of ‘Self’ may also be the voice of the mass, voice of the destined future, voice of the all, must also be the voice of the All, the over soul.

He combined the humanitarian note, embracing common man with a mystical and comprehensive concept of democracy. ‘The ‘all’ feeling, the ideal of large embrace, is the guiding principle of his famous poem *Leaves of Grass* (1855).’

The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* appeared in 1865. In this poem, he celebrates all creation and affirms her faith in the sacredness of man. *Leaves of Grass* was also
inspired by Emerson’s writings especially Emerson’s essay, “The Poet.” Apart from Emerson and Thoreau, it found few sympathetic readers. The poem was not in the conventional style but in free verses. It was ‘a subjective poem of self, it is also confidently equal in its absorption of the past and celebration of the future of a people.’ According to him, man is divine, the Self-true, the world is good.

Whitman was born on a modest, barely literate Long Island family. He was successful in creating a distinctive American voice in his poems. He spoke of his nation ceaselessly and wrote ‘I hear America singing’. He published his later prose account Specimen Days in 1882. His cycle of war poems Drum Taps based on his experiences of the war came out in 1865. Whitman view of life was mystical. ‘He felt that the material world and all its inhabitants were emanations of divinity, and therefore sacred, and that men could achieve a sense of unity with God.’ This attitude of Whitman was stimulated and inspired by the writings of Emerson. People in America lacked religious and moral faith in democratic values according to him. So:

Loving comradeship was for Whitman the essential keystone of American Democracy, and its celebration was the main purpose of both his writings and his personal life.

Hence, he made his principle a reality for American people. He gave the American people what transcendentalists and other writers could not give. Whitman was like Emerson in temperament and talent. ‘Both overcome the stifling influences of their
cultures to accept the challenge of producing a literature that was uniquely American because it reflected the spontaneity of “becoming” in the new world.25

Another very important writer of the nineteenth century America was Edgar Allan Poe. He occupies a unique place in the history of American literature.

He defined for the first time in American literature some of the technical roles governing literary craftsmanship and thereby influenced all creative writers to come after him.26

He also refined the short story genre and invented detective fiction. Poe started his career with poetry. He wrote important works in the field of criticism, poetry and short story. He was born in 1809 and brought up by foster parents living at Richmond, Virginia. From 1831 to his death in 1849, he earned a small income by editing and contributing articles to magazines. His most famous work is The Fall of the House of Usher published in 1839. He published his work, The Raven and other poems in 1845. He does not have any interest in the social ideals of his time. Poe believed that:

The function of art was to create an ideal beauty which would provide a pleasurable elevation or excitement of the soul. … and should be judged solely by aesthetic standards.27

For Poe, strangeness was a essential element of beauty. So, ‘like Emerson, Poe is poet of mental adventure; he is in a fashion a transcendentalist, seeing reason pointing the way beyond itself through intuition and imagination.”28
Margaret Fuller was another very important writer of this era. She was also a staunch transcendentalist and was closely associated with the magazine *The Dial*. She edited it from 1840 to 1842. She called for emancipation of the woman in a male oriented society and was a pioneer of feminist movement in America. She wrote a famous book, *Woman in the Nineteenth century* published in 1845. This 'book is written in a rhetorical style similar to that of Emerson and draws its inspiration from the Emersonian and Transcendentalist belief in self-reliance and self-emancipation.' 29 In this book, she calls upon every woman to have a proper education to develop their own self-respect and be self-dependent. Like Emerson, she believed in a world of flux and process. Emerson also had warm regard for her. So, when she died tragically in shipwreck in July 1850, Emerson commented sadly: I have lost in her my audience, and I hurry now to my work admonished that I have a few days left.30

In the religious field also, this period saw many major changes. ‘The bounds of traditional authority were broken as men realized that the life of the spirit belonged to them rather than to the churches.’ 31 Calvinism, which was prevalent in New England during the eighteenth century, was slowly giving way to another form of religion. The Great Awakening in 1740 and 1790 rejected the Calvinist doctrine and depicted God in terms that are more compassionate. By the early decades of the nineteenth century, the liberals, who were against Calvinism, started to establish a stronghold in and around Boston. Controversy between the liberals and the orthodox reached its peak in 1805, when Henry Ware elected Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard. The controversy
resulted in a split of the original congregational churches in which the liberals also known as Unitarians emerged as a new denomination. In ‘Unitarian Christianity’, William Ellery Channing, the leading spokesperson for the new generation of liberals, declared the separate existence of the Unitarian movement and advanced a theological programme centered on the human capacity for reason and spiritual development. By the 1820’s Unitarianism had a strong foundation in Boston and eastern Massachusetts. The American Unitarian Association formed in 1825.

In ‘Unitarian Christianity’, Channing defended the human capacity to make reasoned judgments about theology and to act as independent moral agents in life’s experiences. He argued that Calvinist doctrines do not help the moral development of the individual. Channing wrote:

> It is plain that a doctrine, which contradicts our best ideas of goodness and justice, cannot come from the just and good God, or be a true representation of his character.\(^32\)

He emphasized the divine potential within every individual. He gives importance to the necessity and means of cultivating this divine potential in all his religious teachings. The most brilliant sermon that Emerson ever heard was the lecture on ‘The Evidence of Revealed Religion by William Ellery Channing delivered at Harvard on March 14, 1821.’\(^33\) Channing’s sermon “Discourse upon Revelation” impressed him. In an 1828 sermon, ‘Likeness to God’, Channing expressed his idea of the spiritual quality of the
self. This would eventually become one of the hallmarks of transcendentalism. Channing wrote:

    To understand a great and good being, we must have the seeds of the same excellence. God becomes a real being to us, in proportion as his own nature is unfolded within us.\textsuperscript{34}

We can see the Unitarian rejection of Calvinism in this concept of Channing. According to him, human nature is the reflection of God’s nature.

    Channing’s message of self-culture became the very basis of a new concept of the religious life. It brought a ‘process of disciplined intellectual and moral growth, and a deepening sensitivity, and capacity for spiritual perception and discernment.’\textsuperscript{35} The younger generation who heard Channing, Emerson among them, responded to both strands of his conception of the spiritual life. This lecture was:

    An extended process of gradual inner growth dependent on discipline and careful self-cultivation, and that, within it, one would discover the crucially important confirmation of ‘experience’, a feeling of a ‘Divine presence, within.’\textsuperscript{36}

This concept of Channing paved the way for a very important movement in the history of American literature. This message of Channing delivered when Emerson was contemplating his vocation as a Unitarian minister. The basic concepts of Unitarianism insist that man is essentially good and that man must trust his own perceptions of religious truth. This concept gave the very foundation of Transcendentalism in
America. The transcendentalists drew the distinction between understanding and reason from Channing’s idea of having confidence in ‘our rational faculties’. They also carry the reliance upon the intuitive perceptions much further than conventional Unitarianism.

Transcendentalism thus emerged from its Unitarian roots. However, it also became an embattled movement. Controversy started between the Unitarians and transcendentalists. The transcendentalists began to draw a sharp distinction between understanding and reason. They also carry the reliance upon the intuitive perceptions much further than conventional Unitarianism. The transcendentalists thought that the Unitarian movement has become hardened into convention and routine. Initially, an outgrowth of the Unitarianism formulated by Channing under the pressures of the Unitarian controversy, it spilled over the boundaries of the church. It helped to unlock the literary taste and ambitions of the people who could no longer accept the aesthetic starvation of Americans. The spirit of restless energy and poetic brilliance of Emerson characterized the Transcendentalist movement in America.

Therefore, transcendentalism, a very important movement, began to flourish in the early nineteenth century, especially in New England. Transcendentalism in America was based on Transcendental Philosophy of the German Idealist. But they did not strictly follow it. In America, ‘Transcendentalism’ was used in a literary form having a semi-religious nature. Transcendentalism represent one of the recurrent
periods in which the party of the past and the party of the future collide. America during this period of transcendentalism has become more conscious to each aspect of life. People began to be more reflective in their outlook and thinking. It was a period of social, political and spiritual awakening in America. Emerson, one of the leaders of transcendentalism in America, concluded:

The key to the period appeared to be that the mind had become aware of itself. Men grew reflective and intellectual. There was a new consciousness.

Transcendentalism was thus a movement in history containing both expansive hope and a sense of strife and embattlement. It was a movement which was marked by the emergence of new intellectual categories, new relations among persons and classes, and new ethical and political imperatives.

Transcendentalism emerged as a full-fledged movement of New England between 1815 and 1836. The first date marks the maturing of the liberalizing ministry of William Ellery Channing. The second date marks the publication of Emerson’s *Nature*, the original and probably the best systematic expression of transcendental philosophy. Thereafter, the movement continued to expand, first as a revolt against a sterile Unitarian orthodoxy, second, as a protest against the continuing cultural dependence of America on Europe, lastly, as a profound exploration of the spiritual foundations and moral implications of the new democracy.
The American transcendentalists include Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Ripley, Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau and Theodore Parker. These transcendentalists formed the transcendentalist club after a series of meetings and discussions in 1836. The transcendentalists were usually associated with Concord, Massachusetts, but none of the members except Thoreau lived there. The town, however, became a literary colony. Emerson moved there in 1834 and later on, Alcott, Channing and others followed him. Many of the transcendentalists were active in the lyceum movement in the nineteenth century. This movement gave them a platform to espouse their views as well as supplementing their income. Emerson and Thoreau gave many lectures but Emerson was the popular one. Margaret Fuller and Bronson Alcott preferred to give their views within discussion groups. Emerson published his famous book, *Nature* in 1836. This book expresses his fundamental concepts of transcendentalism. He also recognized the importance of Immanuel Kant and the German Idealist philosophical tradition to his work and that of his contemporaries.

In 1840, the transcendentalists launched their own periodical, *The Dial*, with Margaret Fuller as the first editor, and Emerson, George Ripley and Bronson Alcott involved in the planning process. They intended it as the vehicle for the expression of their own thoughts, and the retransmission of texts and ideas that had been important to them. They felt that it would speak to a wider audience of young people who were also engaged in the process of cultural and social reform. With *The Dial*, Emerson and his colleagues hoped to ‘give expression to that spirit that lifts men to a higher platform’.
a changed thinking and perspective which would also mean a change in habits and actions. *The Dial*, therefore, may be the most revealing window into both excesses and accomplishments of Transcendentalism. It contains a mixture of reviews, literary essays, theological discourse, political commentary and theory, and translations. The transcendentalists were also involved in the process of educational reforms. Bronson Alcott founded the Temple School in Boston to give a much more student-centered approach to education. The women transcendentalists like Elizabeth Peosody and Margaret Fuller were also actively involved in educational reforms. The Transcendentalists were involved in altering the political and economic system of that time. The best example of this is Thoreau’s agrarian experiment at Walden Pond, in which he tested the virtues of strict economy, the study of nature, and the contemplative life. Thoreau’s brilliant account of his life in the woods in Walden has become an essential American book, not only central to the canon of nineteenth century American literature, but also a founding text for the modern environmental movement.

Thus, transcendentalism plays a very important and role in the history of American literature. The transcendentalist spirit worked in many ways to change the life and thoughts of American people. Various critics and writers have tried to defined transcendentalism. However, they cannot reach to a universally accepted concept of this term. According to Spiller, transcendentalism:

> Conferred upon American literature a perspective far wider and deeper than that proposed by its own formulated doctrines, the perspective of humanity itself.39
In the field of literature, this period saw many important writers who made great impacts in American literature. The various writers of this age were influenced by the English literature of that time. The transcendentalists tried to bring a distinctive American voice by breaking away from the shackles of European literature. However, both foreign and domestic influences, old and new, were notable to these writers.

The “Essay” reached a standard literary form during this period. People used to write the accounts of their various experiences through the essays. Emerson and Thoreau wrote many essays during this time and they were the main essayists. Another essayist of this period was James Russell Lowell, and a large share of his prose dealt with the issue of the day. He also wrote many poems and published his first book of poems *A Year’s Life* in 1841. Wendell Holmes was also a prose writer of a frankly utilitarian kind of this period. *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table* (1858) was his famous prose work.

His popular lectures, his discursive essays both humorous and critical, and his entertaining verses often written to order for special occasions, made him one of the most widely read and respected men of his time.40

Like Lowell, Holmes followed the example of the nineteenth century English essays such as Lamb and Hazlitt. Women writers like Fuller also contributed by writing various essays.
Another form, which was very common during this period, was poetry. The poets of this time followed a combination of the ancient and the modern in their works. The poetry of the pre-war period had more of the elegance and remoteness characteristic of poetry. They learned procedures in writing from modern writers such as Goethe, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats and from those of older times such as Norse epic poems. The poetry writers of this period were Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes, Whitman and Poe. Longfellow, Holmes and Lowell represented the American tradition and they followed the traditional forms. But Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman rebelled against the traditional forms. Whitman’s poetry, especially Leaves of Grass, has become an immortal work of American poetry. Emerson published two volumes of poems. Some of his poems are very famous like his Essays and Lectures. His poems contains the spiritual elements expressed in his essays.

Another form of literature, which was very prominent during that time, was the travelogue. The travelogue became an essential type of American narrative as never before, often testing the Self in new types of quest on a new continent, a vast land and seascape for the American mind to wander. So, the transcendentalist poem or essay, the travel-record or the questing memoir of Self seemed the ideal mode of expression. But by the mid nineteenth century, America was also discovering and writing itself through the novel, above all, the novels of Hawthorne and Melville. Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and Melville’s *Moby-Dick* became the most famous novels of that time. Longfellow and other writers also wrote novels but their works were not as famous as that of Hawthorne and Melville. Lastly, another literary form, which evolved during
this time, was the short story. And, Edgar Allan Poe was a famous writer of this genre of literature.

Various writers and persons inspired, Emerson in his writing and his thinking. Emerson’s family background plays a very important role in shaping his mind and art. Emerson’s father died when he was only eight years old. So, his family was always in poverty during his early age. His Aunt, Mary Moody Emerson came to stay with them after the death of his father. His Aunt influenced him a lot. Aunt Mary had a strong puritan zeal. She was very orthodox in her belief and thinking. However, she has a shrewd common sense and an instable intellectual curiosity. Aunt Mary’s moral sense and sharp mind influenced Emerson in his childhood days. Emerson profoundly respected her for she was both a mystic and critic. She sharpened his wit and deepened his perceptions. During his early years, Emerson took both his doubts and discoveries to her. The correspondence between her and Emerson helped in shaping Emerson’s career as a writer. Through her letters, she used to give valuable advice and ideas. Assessing her place in his life, Emerson concluded.

She must always occupy a Saint’s place in my household;
and I have no hour of poetry or philosophy, since I knew
these things, into which she does not enter as a genius. \(^{41}\)

During these years, Emerson developed the habit of introspection. His intimate experience with people hardly extended beyond his family. He does not have many friends at Harvard. He wrote:
The friends that occupy my thoughts are not men but certain Phantoms clothed in the form and face and apparel of men by whom they were suggested and to whom they

Emerson was intimate with his brothers as they lived in an almost closed society. They memorized poems or verses of scripture in their free time. Emerson began to keep journals from an early age. This habit of keeping a journal helped in his intellectual growth.

Unfortunately, Emerson struggled with sickness and adversity along with poverty and introspection. The shadow of the white plague lay across the Emerson family and Emerson barely escaped its doom. His two brothers died due to this disease. ‘Emerson recorded Edward’s death in 1834 in his journal with a dark, thought which made him remember the death of Ellen, his first wife. The death of his brothers affected him adversely. Frederic I. Carpenter wrote:

Together with poverty, his domestic life trained him in the virtues of Truth and Mutual Faiths.

Emerson’s college education at Harvard influenced him a lot. His courses were in Latin, Greek and English, History and Rhetoric. The routine instruction bored him, and his poverty handicapped him socially. His boredom caused Emerson to begin his second education at Harvard. He started reading books not assigned, or even approved by his tutors. He read Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and the book influence his thinking. Gay W Allen wrote that:
He was both repelled and fascinated by it, but it introduced him to contemporary British poetry, which he never heard mentioned in the classroom.45

He also read the works of Wordsworth, Milton, Bacon, Shakespeare and Burke during this time at Harvard. He also read all the biographical and critical material he could find on Socrates in the Harvard Library. Emerson’s favourite authors were Montaigne, the tough-minded skeptic and Plato, the idealist. These two writers inspired Emerson greatly. He also read books about Science and Newton’s *Principia* and Lyell’s *Geology* opened his mind to both the old and the new Science. One of Emerson’s favourite books since his youth was Bacon’s *Essays*. He agrees with the views of Bacon regarding friendship, love and marriage. Three professors who influenced Emerson at Harvard were Edward Everelt, George Ticknor and Edward Tyrrel charring. ‘The course that most deeply influenced him in his senior year was Professor Levi Fribies’s moral philosophy.’46

Several philosophers and writers influenced Emerson. The ideas of plato also helped him in the development of his transcendentalist philosophy. Plato’s idealistic vision of Nature and the precedence that Plato gave to mind over matter influenced him. In Emerson’s opinion, Plato stood first among philosophers. According to him, ‘Plato is philosophy and philosophy, Plato’. He wrote,

> Out of Plato came all things that are still written and debated among men of thought.47
Plato contributed not only to Emerson’s Philosophical make-up but also to his literary procedure. In his work *Representative Men*, one of the essays is on Plato, the Philosopher. So, several Platonic ideas are seen in Emerson’s writings.

The Neo-Platonists formed another important source of idealism for Emerson. Emerson was led to Neo-Platonism though the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth. He read Cudworth’s *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678) when he was studying at Harvard. The influence of another Neoplatonist, Plotinus on Emerson’s thought is preeminent. Emerson’s first book, *Nature* began with a motto from Plotinus. Both, Plotinus and Emerson conceptualize a transcendental One that is simultaneously immanent, the one being merely the other side of human consciousness, since it infuses not only itself and nature, but man as well. Of first importance is the similarity between Plotinus One and Emerson’s *Over-Soul*.48

Indian literature and religion also influenced Emerson. He got interested in Indian literature and religion and was familiar with a variety of sources when he was at Harvard. ‘As a boy Emerson had visited India Wharf in Boston and seen the great stores of products imported from the Orient’.49 All his life he had heard of the works of American and British missionaries in India. He read the articles, which his father had published on India in the “Monthly Anthology.” He also read other discussions on India in the “North America Review.” Most important of all the works that he read were the translations of Hindu classics by Sir William Jones. The Hindu classics
especially the *Laws of Manu* and the *Bhagavad Gita* he read at Harvard Library. Any reader could see the influences of Oriental sources in his essays and poems. Various poems of Emerson have Hindu names as titles, for instance, his poems “Brahma” and “Hamatrya”. His concept of ‘over-soul’ is somewhat same as the Hindu concept of the *Atma*, the soul.

Emerson and several members of the transcendental club received special impulses from various German thinkers. In fact, several member of the club were good German scholars. Emerson acquired the knowledge of German idealism through second hand sources. He acquired German knowledge through Coleridge, Carlyle and Wordsworth. Three Philosophers dominate the school of German Idealism. They are John Fichte, Friedrich Schelling and George Hegel. Nevertheless, their influence an Emerson was not overwhelming. In fact, Kant influenced Emerson more. Kant, strictly speaking, was not an Idealist but he holds an important place among the melange of influences acting on Emerson during his most innovative and creative years. The roots of the German Idealists are implanted in Kant’s Philosophy. Kant gives the distinction, vital to both Coleridge and Emerson, between understanding and Reason. Kant was also the first to use the word “transcendental” - a term emanating from his notions of the transcendental ego and transcendental object. So, the cardinal concepts of German Idealism find ample expression in Emerson’s work. The Kantian distinction between Reason and understanding is there in Emerson’s work. The concepts of absolute reason or spirit, mind and matter and reality are also seen in his work.
Lastly, some of the English Idealists like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Carlyle influenced the thinking and writings of Emerson. Emerson acquired the knowledge of German Idealism through these English Idealists. Wordsworth appealed to his reformative instinct. Coleridge encouraged reliance on intuition. Emerson was very close to Carlyle. He entered into a correspondence with Carlyle and it continued throughout his life. The letters that he shares with Carlyle ultimately filled two volumes. They also met and talked about various topics. His correspondence with Carlyle, however, continued even at a later date. But they could not meet frequently at the later stage.

Though Emerson got inspiration from various ideas and impulses, the sources did not completely overwhelm him. Rather he digested them, and added an American flavour to them. He never departed from the tradition and loyalty of his country. As a result:

His interest was eclectic and synthetic; to extract quintessential wisdom from the inspired writings of all faiths.  

His writings reflect the ideas of God and its relation to other things of the Universe. A detailed discussion of Emerson’s spiritualism will be made in the next chapter.
NOTES


