

Original Article

Transcendentalist Concepts of Nature and Imagination in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This study examines Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendentalist philosophy, particularly his concepts of nature and imagination, as a framework for interpreting Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Emerson's "Nature" presents the natural world as an organic unity in which human beings participate as living parts. Recognition of this unity enables individuals to perceive the Universal Being, the divine spirit permeating humanity and nature. Imagination further allows the mind to transcend immediate appearances by transforming ordinary objects and landscapes into symbols of spiritual truth. **Methods:** Using Emerson's concepts of nature, the Universal Being, and imagination as a theoretical framework, this study analyzes Hawthorne's portrayal of nature and the relationships of Hester and Pearl with the natural world in *The Scarlet Letter*. Particular attention is given to the contrast between Puritan society and the natural world, as well as to Pearl's relationship with the forest. **Results:** In *The Scarlet Letter*, nature is not an indifferent background but a compassionate and spiritually meaningful presence. Whereas Puritan society condemns and isolates Hester, nature offers sympathy, freedom, and the possibility of spiritual renewal. Although both Hester and Pearl are closely associated with nature, Pearl achieves the deepest harmony with it in the forest. Her unrestricted imagination enables her to transcend social limitations and unite with the divine spirit, making her a medium through which the Universal Being expresses itself. **Conclusions:** The analysis demonstrates that the novel reflects important aspects of Emersonian Transcendentalism. Hawthorne presents nature as both an organic unity and a manifestation of divine presence, while imagination serves as a means of spiritual transcendence. Pearl's relationship with the forest most clearly shows how imaginative freedom can restore the individual's unity with nature and the divine. Hawthorne's engagement with Transcendentalism is therefore complex but deeply informed by Emerson's understanding of humanity's spiritual relationship with the natural world.

Keywords: Emerson, Imagination, Organic nature, *The Scarlet Letter*, Transcendentalism

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1. Introduction

Modern society places individuals in a persistent state of tension with the world around them. In a rapidly transforming environment, people often no longer perceive themselves as active agents shaping their surroundings. Mass media continuously supplies information, entertainment, and popular culture, encouraging individuals to accept what is presented to them rather than creating their own perspectives. As a result, many people experience

increasingly standardized lives and become dependent upon external influences.

Against this backdrop, an exploration of Transcendentalism becomes particularly valuable. Transcendentalist thought emphasizes the autonomy and uniqueness of each individual. As a philosophical form of idealism, it highlights intuitive understanding, the sacred presence within both humanity and nature, and the inherent worth of every person. The movement exerted considerable influence in New England from the 1830s through the

1870s. It developed around Ralph Waldo Emerson after the publication of his essay "Nature" in 1836. The gatherings of Emerson and his associates became known as the Transcendental Club, from which the name of the movement itself was derived.

According to Transcendentalist philosophy, God, humanity, and nature are united through a universal spiritual force that Emerson referred to as the 'Over-Soul.' Inspired by Romantic ideals, Emerson sought communion with this divine presence through solitary encounters with nature. Because both nature and human beings express the same spiritual essence, individuals can realize their highest potential when they trust their inner selves, withdraw from social pressures, and cultivate solitude within the natural world. In this sense, human beings possess subjective and creative powers that cannot be entirely dominated by modern civilization.

Transcendentalism was not only a Romantic intellectual movement but also one deeply rooted in religious developments. During the nineteenth century, many American Puritan ministers abandoned traditional Calvinist doctrines, including the concept of the Trinity, and embraced Unitarianism, which rejected Christ's divinity. Emerson himself served as a Unitarian minister. However, he became dissatisfied with Unitarianism's strong emphasis on rational thought and instead argued that divine truth should be apprehended through intuition. Consequently, he emerged as a more radical figure within the Unitarian tradition. Transcendentalism therefore functioned in part as a theological movement within Unitarianism. Moreover, many Transcendentalists were fascinated by non-Western religions and frequently studied sacred texts associated with Hinduism and Buddhism.

Although its period of greatest influence was relatively brief, Transcendentalism continues to resonate in contemporary thought through its affirmation of the sacred qualities of both humanity and nature. Its legacy also survives in major works of nineteenth-century American literature. The present study therefore investigates the principles of Transcendentalism and examines how they are reflected in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.

Hawthorne, while influenced by Transcendentalist ideas, adopted a more cautious and less optimistic perspective than many of his contemporaries. Although he shared its interest in nature, conscience, imagination, and individual dignity, he rejected its optimistic belief in human goodness and spiritual perfectibility. Hawthorne doubted that intuition, self-reliance, or withdrawal from society could automatically lead to moral truth. His novel emphasizes that human beings are also shaped by guilt, pride, secrecy,

inherited sin, and self-deception. Nevertheless, Hawthorne shared the movement's appreciation for the beauty and significance of nature. Scholars such as R. W. B. Lewis have suggested that Hawthorne's views combined elements derived from both Jonathan Edwards and Emerson [1]. As a result, his writings reveal a complex engagement with Transcendentalist thought.

Evidence of Hawthorne's connection to Transcendentalism can also be found in his close personal relationship with Emerson. Hawthorne even spent his honeymoon at the Old Manse, Emerson's former residence. Critics have noted that Hawthorne's experiences there reflected an idealized return to nature reminiscent of the biblical Garden of Eden. Darrel Abel (1951) [2] argues that the period represented for Hawthorne a restoration of humanity's original relationship with nature. She says, "Hawthorne's honeymoon in the Old Manse seemed to him a renewal of an interrupted life in nature, a return to Eden" [3]. Carl Strauch [4] strengthens this view by stating that Hawthorne's work often "stresses the idyllic domestic exercise of love that evokes the divinely primitive Innocence of the Garden of Eden" [4]. In *The Scarlet Letter*, nature is portrayed in a manner that often corresponds with Transcendentalist interpretations, making an understanding of nature essential to any analysis of the novel's characters.

Since Hawthorne criticized the excessive optimism of Transcendentalism, his more complex engagement with Transcendentalist thought has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. Within this critical context, the present study seeks to distinguish itself from previous scholarship by examining the manifestations of Transcendentalist thought in Hawthorne's representative novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, with particular emphasis on the concepts of nature and imagination.

The next section explores the central concepts of Transcendentalism, paying particular attention to Emerson's ideas concerning nature and imagination. Following this discussion, the study examines *The Scarlet Letter* through a Transcendentalist lens, focusing especially on the characters of Hester Prynne and Pearl. The concluding section summarizes the major arguments. By concentrating specifically on Emerson's theories of nature and imagination, this essay seeks to distinguish itself from earlier studies that have generally addressed the relationship between Transcendentalism and *The Scarlet Letter* in broader terms. It is hoped that this approach will encourage further scholarly discussion of the ways Transcendentalist ideas of nature and imagination are expressed within Hawthorne's novel.

2. Nature and imagination in emerson

American Romanticism emerged under the strong influence of the broader Romantic movement that had developed in Europe. Early American Romantic writers drew more inspiration from European literary traditions than from native American models. As the population of the United States expanded rapidly and settlement pushed westward, these writers sought to express the vitality and unique identity of the developing nation. Rejecting an exclusive reliance on rational thought, they emphasized imagination, emotion, and the power of the individual spirit as essential aspects of human existence. Rather than focusing primarily on divine judgment, they found inspiration in the majesty and beauty of the natural world.

Abel (1963) [3] argues that when Romantic ideas arrived in New England, they evolved into a distinctly American intellectual movement known as Transcendentalism. This movement united the Romantic celebration of individual greatness with a search for a higher moral and spiritual reality [3]. During the 1830s, Boston and neighboring communities became centers of intense intellectual activity. Educational interests extended beyond Harvard University as traveling lecturers introduced scientific and cultural knowledge to both urban and rural audiences throughout New England. Numerous clubs, societies, and associations were formed, creating new opportunities for intellectual engagement. Public lectures became a regular feature of cultural life, and many young people anticipated the arrival of a new spiritual era [5]. At the heart of this movement stood the transcendentalists, among whom Emerson was the leading figure. He maintained that human beings possess an innate goodness and should trust their own intuitions, even when these conflict with prevailing social conventions.

In the opening section of "Nature," often regarded as the foundational statement of Transcendentalist thought, Emerson asks "Why should we not have an original relation to the universe? Why should we not have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition?" [6]. Through these questions, he critiques conventional philosophical systems that impose limitations on human understanding. Traditional views often regarded nature as finite because it consists of bounded physical objects, and therefore associated beauty with the visible forms and boundaries of those objects.

Emerson, however, says that beauty in nature "is the herald of inward and eternal beauty, and is not alone a solid and satisfactory good. It must therefore stand as part and not as yet the last or highest expression of the final cause of Nature" [6]. In this conception, beauty becomes

an aspect of what Emerson calls organic nature. His perspective marks a transition from a purely scientific understanding of nature to an organic one. Within such a framework, nature is perceived not simply as a collection of objects but as a living phenomenon. Cascardi [7] suggests that Emerson's doubts concerning the conventional relationship between nature and physical things were influenced by contemporary developments in science and philosophy [7].

Organic nature encompasses both abstract qualities, such as beauty, and living beings, including plants, animals, and humans. Since human beings form an integral part of this organic whole, they are naturally connected to the environment around them. Emerson contends that genuine contact with nature requires withdrawal from social distractions and immersion in solitude. As he explains, true solitude involves distancing oneself not only from society but also from the mental habits associated with everyday life [6]. Through direct engagement with nature, individuals encounter its unity and become aware of its spiritual dimension. Emerson believes that this connection is possible because both the natural world and the human soul participate in the same divine reality, which he refers to as the Universal Being.

This divine presence operates simultaneously within humanity and nature. Therefore, "The woods are the site for an epiphany, in which the individual human Emerson all but disappears in the currents of the Universal Being" [8]. Emerson famously describes this mystical experience by portraying himself as a "transparent eyeball" [6], through which personal ego disappears and universal consciousness flows. In this state, the individual becomes connected with the divine and experiences unity with all existence. For Emerson, spiritual truth is not imposed from outside the self; rather, it arises from within. As he states, "God will teach a human mind" [6]. Humanity therefore participates in divine wisdom, embodying the infinite within finite existence.

Nevertheless, Emerson acknowledges that human beings and nature also exist in a relationship of duality. Although they continuously influence one another and remain interdependent, each retains its own distinct existence. Nature exerts power over humanity, yet human beings can achieve authority over nature by "being an interpreter of nature" [6]. Emerson assigns this interpretive role primarily to the poet. The poet is not merely a composer of verse but an individual "whose eyes can integrate all the parts" [6]. Unlike ordinary observers, the poet penetrates beneath the surface appearances of reality and discovers the deeper relationships and correspondences concealed within it.

Imagination serves as the essential instrument through

which the poet accomplishes this task. Emerson regards imagination as one of the central powers of the human mind. Ordinary perception offers only fragmented impressions of reality because common sense treats visible objects as fixed and final facts. Imagination, by contrast, reorganizes these fragments into new patterns and connections.

While common sense accepts appearances at face value, imagination reveals symbolic relationships between objects and ideas. Emerson explains that when reason becomes more fully awakened, external forms lose their apparent solidity and become transparent, allowing deeper causes and spiritual realities to emerge [6]. Likewise, he argues that imagination functions as a “second sight” [6], enabling individuals to perceive meanings hidden beneath visible nature.

Through imaginative vision, natural objects such as flowers, streams, snowy landscapes, and wild animals acquire symbolic significance and become connected to human thought. Furthermore, Emerson thinks that “We are symbols and inhabit symbols; workmen, work, and tools, words and things, birth and death, all are emblems” (168) [6]. Imagination transforms sensory experience into ideas and spiritual insight. Consequently, ordinary scenes of nature and everyday experiences are elevated into manifestations of the divine through the heightened consciousness of the poet. In Emerson’s philosophy, imagination possesses an almost limitless creative power, allowing finite human beings to participate in the infinite process of creation itself.

3. Nature and Imagination in *The Scarlet Letter*

Throughout *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne presents nature not as an inert or indifferent force but as a compassionate presence that sympathizes with human suffering. Near the prison of the Puritan community, a patch of ground is covered with coarse and unattractive plants, suggesting a harsh environment. Yet beside the prison door grows a rosebush whose beauty and fragrance symbolize nature’s enduring mercy. While society condemns, excludes, and punishes sinners, nature offers understanding and consolation. The rosebush therefore represents the idea that nature never completely rejects human beings, regardless of their transgressions.

This concept is reinforced in *The American Notebooks* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. There Hawthorne says,

The streak of sunshine journeying through the prisoner’s cell; it may be considered as something sent from heaven to keep the soul alive and glad within him.

And there is something equivalent to this sunbeam in the darkest circumstances; as flowers, which figuratively grew in Paradise, in the dusky room of a maiden in a great city; [...] God does not let us live anywhere or anyhow on earth, without placing something of heaven close at hand. [9]

Hawthorne suggests that God places elements of beauty and grace—such as flowers and sunlight—near human beings even in the darkest circumstances. Such passages closely parallel Transcendentalist thought, which maintains that nature and humanity are united through the presence of a shared divine spirit.

The novel further emphasizes this Transcendental vision through the opposition between society and nature. As Lewis points out, the characters of *The Scarlet Letter* are attracted to either “the village or the forest, the city or the country; for these are the symbols between which the choice must be made” [10]. Puritan society is portrayed as restrictive, judgmental, and punitive, whereas nature is depicted as sympathetic and liberating. Through this contrast, Hawthorne highlights nature as a realm of spiritual freedom.

The scene of Hester Prynne’s public punishment illustrates the oppressive nature of Puritan authority. Governor Bellingham and the colony’s religious leaders observe Hester from an elevated balcony while armed guards surround them. Their physical separation from ordinary citizens and their elevated position suggest a hierarchical power structure more reminiscent of monarchy than a spiritual community. Authority is concentrated in the hands of a small elite, creating a significant imbalance between rulers and common people. Furthermore, Shari Benstock defines Hester as a figure who courageously resists the patriarchal social structure and legalistic Puritan customs [11].

Ironically, those who judge Hester appear least qualified to understand her circumstances. Out of all people “it would not have been easy to select the same number of wise and virtuous persons, who should be less capable of sitting in judgment on an erring woman’s heart, and disentangling its mesh of good and evil” [10]. Obsessed with punishment and moral discipline, the leaders display little compassion. Consequently, Hester pleads, “Let God punish! Thou shalt forgive!” [10].

While society seeks to suppress individual expression, nature encourages freedom and creativity. Hester herself reflects the qualities of nature through her needlework. Sewing provides her with economic support, yet it also serves as an outlet for self-expression within a culture that denies her individuality. Her imaginative craftsmanship is most clearly embodied in the scarlet letter itself,

whose elaborate design transforms a symbol of shame into a manifestation of personal identity. The townspeople become dependent upon the very creativity they officially condemn, further associating Hester with the liberating power of nature.

Transcendentalists believed that human beings are fundamentally good and that corrupt social institutions distort their true nature. They argued that genuine wisdom emerges from personal experience and inward reflection rather than external authority. According to Anne Marie Hacht, Transcendentalism includes the idea that enlightenment can only come from individual searching and that the individual and his or her search are an authority on the matter, since the truth is inside a person [12]. Hester's development throughout the novel exemplifies this principle.

After her imprisonment, Hester settles in a remote cottage situated between the sea and the forest. Although she outwardly complies with the social order, her inner self remains resistant to Puritan values. Mary Suzanne Schriber describes Hester as "not a repentant sinner, but a repentant lover" [13]. On the surface she seems to follow the laws and the social system, but inside she is controlled by her soul which refuses them. Hawthorne seems "to want to grant Hester martyr" [13]. Despite her attempts to maintain a connection with the community, she is treated as an outcast and denied full participation in social and religious life. Rejected by society, she turns increasingly toward nature for comfort and renewal.

Isolated from the community, Hester gradually frees herself from the psychological chains imposed by Puritan society. Living in solitude encourages deep reflection and strengthens her imagination. As a result "Hester's imagination was somewhat affected, and, had she been of a softer moral and intellectual fibre, would have been still more so, by the strange and solitary anguish of her life" [10]. Through this inward journey, she becomes increasingly attuned to the spiritual truths that transcend social conventions.

Although the Puritans outwardly appear pious and virtuous, Hester's experiences reveal the hypocrisy hidden beneath their moral façade. When she encounters respected ministers, judges, and seemingly virtuous women, she senses an unspoken connection between their concealed sins and her own. These moments suggest that moral imperfection is universal and that many who condemn Hester secretly share her human weaknesses. At the same time, they demonstrate how Hester's expanded imagination allows her to perceive truths inaccessible to ordinary members of society.

The contrast between society and nature is also evident

in Hawthorne's portrayal of children. Puritan culture places such heavy emphasis on sin and punishment that even children internalize its harsh values. As Charles Feidelson argues, "the scaffold, situated nearly beneath the eaves of Boston's earliest church, is the center of the society. Not once in the book is a church physically described or a scene actually staged within it" [14]. Being brought up in such negative circumstances, the Puritan children often imitate violence, persecution, and warfare, reflecting the rigid moral atmosphere in which they are raised. They play while "scourging Quakers; or taking scalps in a sham-fight with the Indians; or scaring one another with freaks of imitative witchcraft" [10]. Their play is cruel for children.

Pearl, by contrast, develops outside the influence of conventional society. As the daughter of Hester and Dimmesdale, she is excluded from normal social relationships and must entertain herself. Consequently, she forms an intimate bond with nature. Her imagination transforms trees, weeds, and other natural objects into symbolic figures, revealing a creativity far richer than that of the Puritan children. Whereas their play reproduces the values of society, Pearl's imagination emerges directly from her interaction with the natural world.

The Transcendental significance of nature reaches its highest point during the scenes in the forest. When Hester and Pearl enter the woods, Pearl is repeatedly associated with a brook whose mysterious origin mirrors her own uncertain social identity. More importantly, Pearl symbolizes a pure connection to nature uncorrupted by social institutions. Abel [2] describes Pearl as "a Child of Nature" in the sense that "a Child of Nature is properly speaking one who discovers conscious and valuable affinities with the natural world and enjoys an active and formative relationship with the world [...] Little Pearl manifests this relationship between man and nature; her life and the life of nature are contiguous and sympathetic modes of being" [2]. Pearl converses with streams, listens to their voices, and interprets their moods. She says, "'O brook! O foolish and tiresome little brook!' cried Pearl, after listening to it talk for a while. 'Why art thou so sad? Pluck up a spirit, and do not be all the time sighing and murmuring!'" [10]. For Pearl, nature is alive, communicative, and spiritually significant.

Her harmony with nature extends beyond the brook. Birds, squirrels, wolves, and other creatures respond to her with unusual familiarity. Hawthorne suggests that the forest and its inhabitants recognize in Pearl a wildness akin to their own. She exists in a state of natural sympathy with the wilderness, demonstrating the interconnectedness of all living beings.

Through imagination, Pearl perceives hidden relationships among the elements of nature. She understands instinctively that flowers, animals, forests, and streams participate in a larger spiritual reality. In this sense, she embodies the Transcendentalist belief that imagination provides access to deeper truths.

Pearl's spiritual role becomes especially important when Hester and Dimmesdale reunite in the forest. After Hester removes the scarlet letter and plans a future with Dimmesdale, Pearl insists that the symbol be restored. Then, finding that the scarlet letter has disappeared from her mother's breast, "At length, assuming a singular air of authority, Pearl stretched out her hand, with the small forefinger extended, and pointing evidently towards her mother's breast" (182) [10]. Her reaction suggests an intuitive awareness that their plan cannot resolve the deeper moral and spiritual conflicts that divide them, because "Hester cannot go into Dimmesdale's world, where both might find peace of soul in an orthodox submission to the Calvinistic God; and he cannot come into hers, where both might find joy in a free submission to human love" [15]. Hester and Dimmesdale remain trapped between human desire and religious obligation.

This episode reflects Emerson's vision of a universal unity connecting humanity, nature, and the divine. In *Nature*, Emerson argues that individuals who approach nature properly may transcend their limited selves and participate in a larger spiritual whole. Pearl's behavior in the forest embodies this ideal. At that moment, she appears united with nature and the divine spirit, functioning as a symbol of the universal harmony celebrated by Transcendentalist philosophy.

4. Conclusion

According to Emerson, many individuals lack confidence in their own judgment and instead allow society to shape their thoughts. However, he argues that social conformity prevents genuine personal development. For this reason, Emerson encourages people to develop their own intellectual and spiritual capacities rather than following popular opinion. Among the powers of the human mind, he places particular importance on imagination. Imagination does more than simply process sensory experiences; it reorganizes scattered impressions into meaningful forms. Through this deeper mode of perception, individuals are able to recognize realities that lie beyond outward appearances. Consequently, imagination plays a crucial role in helping people grasp the unity that underlies all existence.

Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* demonstrates many of the principles associated with Transcendentalist thought. In the novel, nature is portrayed as intimately connected to humanity, responding to human emotions and inner states. Both Hester and Pearl possess vivid imaginative abilities that allow them to perceive reality beyond ordinary observation. Pearl, in particular, maintains a strong bond with the natural world, especially during her experiences in the forest. Surrounded by and harmonizing with the living forces of nature, her imagination expands without restriction. This heightened imaginative power enables her to merge with a divine presence. As a result, her individual identity seems to dissolve, giving way to a larger spiritual unity through which the divine operates.

In contemporary society, people rarely regard the self as something valuable in its own right. Instead, the self is often viewed as a means of achieving external success or social advancement. Under such circumstances, personal identity becomes little more than an instrument. This tendency leads individuals to define themselves through admired figures, material possessions, or ideological commitments, making it difficult for them to perceive a deeper sense of being. Transcendentalism challenges this limited perspective by encouraging people to reject the notion that they are merely finite and dependent creatures. Rather, it calls on them to place faith in their inner selves, transcend imposed limitations, and strive toward a higher form of existence by fully realizing their inherent potential and moving closer to the divine.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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