

Transcendentalism Aspects in the Poem *The Rhodora* by Ralph Waldo Emerson (Genetic Structuralism Analysis)

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to analyze the collective world view in Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem *The Rhodora*. The theory of genetic structuralism by Lucien Goldmann is used to find out the relation between the structure of literary work and the structure of society as its background. The relation is identified through the world view or ideology expressed through the work since the author is the member of particular society. The whole meaning of the poem could be achieved by studying the structure of the poem and its genetic or social- historical context. The method of this research is dialectic method between the text of *The Rhodora*, the world view of Emerson and the whole social structure to gain the coherence. This research found that the poem *The Rhodora* represents a transcendentalism world view. Transcendentalism is the essential elements of Romantic Movement in America around 19th century which emphasizes the unity of God, man, and universe. This poem offers spirituality obtained through the bond of man and nature. Transcendentalism offers the idea that intuition is the guide to spiritual truth.

Keywords: Transcendentalism, Romanticism, Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Rhodora

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Introduction

Literature is a creative work of a certain culture. As an imaginative work, it comprises of written and oral form. Literary study does not only intend to understand a particular literary work, but also to achieve broader comprehension about a period and culture. In other words, language as a medium of literary art is a living human creation and contains the cultural and linguistic content of a particular group (Wellek & Warren, 1995: 14). As a cultural product, the analysis of literary works does not only aim to know distinctive characteristic of the work and the author but also to learn the system of values and meaning in them. Thus, literary studies have a significant role in cultural studies.

Literature is not only the representation of a particular social context, but also a medium of social critics. It reflects the view or ideology of an author. In connection to this research, an author whose works both as a means of expression and social struggle is Ralph Waldo Emerson. He is a prominent writer in 19th century America. He has produced numerous essays and poems as a response to social condition in his era. As a member of society, the view of Emerson is dependent upon or certainly influenced by the collective world view.

Emerson was known as an influential figure of romantic movement. The movement was a reaction toward rationalism in the 18th century. It drove a few breakthroughs in all aspects of human life including cultural products such as art and literature in America. The movement centered upon art as an inspiration, spiritual dimension, and aesthetics of nature. Besides, the movement seemed perfectly suitable to the American democracy which emphasized individualism, aesthetic and ethical values. The beauty of American nature also represented the ideas of this movement. Self-realization, self-expression, and self-reliance were the central idea of romanticism. Emerson became the symbol of the birth of American individualism inspired by nature. His ideas focused on new national views, personal experiences, the universe over the individual soul, as well as spiritual views and practices. Her spiritual insights were influenced by her reading about eastern religions such as Hindu, and Sufi Islam (VanSpanckeren, 1994: 26 & 28). The reading of Asian religious texts highly inspired the thought of Emerson on his transcendental philosophy.

One aspect of romanticism is transcendentalism. Emerson was well known as a transcendentalist and the founder of Transcendental Club. This movement was based on a fundamental belief on the unity of world and God. The idea of self-reliance and individualism evolved through the belief in the process of identifying the individual soul and God. If traced back from its history, Transcendentalism was associated with an area called Concord, New England, near to Boston. Concord was the first colony of Massachusetts Bay surrounded by woods. The area was a peaceful and quiet territory. Concord became the first place for artists and thinkers to offer the spiritual values and alternative culture to American materialism at the time. A number of transcendentalists also served as anti-slavery activists. The idea of transcendentalism stressed the differences and unique views of every individual. American authors often considered themselves as lonesome explorers who escaped from society and conventional norms or rules. In the era of transcendentalism, there was a great pressure to discover the authentic literary forms and contents independent of the influence of English literature (VanSpanckeren 1994: 26-27). Thus, romanticism

drove significant changes in all aspects of American society. American democratic values and their natural beauty were considered as the representation of romantic ideas. This movement emphasized individualism, self-reliance, and transcendentalism. Transcendentalism believed on the unity of the universe and God. In other words, man and nature had the similar spirit of divinity.

One of Emerson literary works is the poem *The Rhodora* created in 1834. The poem contains transcendentalism aspects and the glorification of nature which represents romantic thought around 19th century in America. Rhodora itself is the name of flower which grows only in the northeastern part of America. This poem definitely does not just describe the type of flower called Rhodora but it contains philosophical meanings about the relationship of the universe, humans, and God summarized in the concept of transcendentalism. In connection with the background explained previously, the research questions are; (1) How is the structure of the poem *The Rhodora*? (2) What worldview does the author express? (3) What social structure does affect the worldview?

Theoretical Framework

The theory used to analyze the research problem is Lucien Goldmann's genetic structuralism theory. Faruk (2012: 159-163) posits that genetic structuralism is not only the way to understand the structure of literary works but also the meaning of the structure. The analysis is conducted to find out the factors which drive such structures. Genetic structuralism understands literary works as a fact of humanity not a natural one since natural fact only studies the work at the level of the structure, while the fact of humanity reaches the level of meaning. A work does not simply exist, but there is a particular need which drives the creation of the work. The intended need is to create a balance with the surrounding environment, both natural and human environment. Furthermore, literary works are the product of collective subjects. Man acts in establishing a balance. Individual action is different from collective action. Individual action is committed in order to meet individual needs while collective action within the framework of the fulfillment of social needs. Literary work is an expression of world view, or in the other words, the needs of a particular social class constructed from the connection between the social class and the surrounding environment. Thus, the writer as a member of a particular social class in society implicitly expresses his world view or collective mental tendencies through his works. This is further explained as follows;

The major difference between research of a genetic structuralist inspiration and traditional literary criticism lies in the fact that the former relates the work to a collective subject while the latter relates it to an individual one. More particularly, however, for genetic structuralism the collective subject constitutes a significant structure which is not entirely conscious. This significant structure always assumes the structuring of a collective subject which acts rationally or meaningfully within a given situation, in the midst of internally and externally inspired changes. Now, these changes can only be understood if one goes beyond the domain of this or that particular science, especially the one to which the object under study pertains (Goldmann, 1980: 87).

It is clearly stated that the understanding of social structure is essential to gain the comprehension of the structure of literary work. The change of one structure influences another. Hence, the interpretation of a work is achieved through its genesis or production. On the other words, the literary works are created to fulfill the functional need in broader structure.

Simply, genetic structuralism sees literary works consisting of intrinsic elements which could not be separated from its extrinsic. The literary work is a reflection of the socio-historical context as its background. Broadly speaking, Goldman states that genetic structuralism sees the relationship between the meanings of an element with other elements in a literary work. Goldmann argues that literary work is a representation of the author's world view as the member of a particular society. The focus of the study of genetic structuralism is the relationship between the structure of literary works and the structure of society through the worldview or ideology expressed through the work. So the understanding of a work becomes intact regarding to the social background in which the literary text is born. In other words, the ideology or worldview of the author relates to particular social group. Therefore, the term genetic in genetic structuralism implies that the meaning of the work is achieved by examining the origin or the genetic element. A literary work is seen as the representation of reality for it reveals various aspects such as social, political, cultural, or economic aspect. Thus the intrinsic elements of the work are related to its external elements which are a number of important events occurring at a particular time (Endraswara, 2011: 56-57).

To sum up, genetic structuralism theory is used to understand a literary work as a whole. The total meaning could be achieved by focusing on both the structure of the text that are intrinsic elements which construct a work and its external aspects. Genetic structuralism focuses on the collective world view expressed by the author through his works.

Research Method

The research method consists of data collection and data analysis.

Data Collection

The primary data in this research is the text *The Rhodora* by Ralph Waldo Emerson which consists of 16 lines. The secondary data are books, articles, or other written sources which comprehensively explain about Emerson and the social structure of America in the early of 19th century.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the poem *The Rhodora* with genetic structuralism is conducted through comprehensive reading of the text to understand the whole elements, then describing and connecting the text, the author's world view, and humanity facts or social structure related to the creation of the poem. After analyzing the relations between the internal and the external elements of the poem, then the collective world view could be identified.

Finding and Discussion

The Structure of the Poem *The Rhodora*

The poem *The Rhodora* consists of 16 lines, Emerson describes the elements of nature as a symbol of spirituality. This poem begins with the opening sentence in the form of question as follows:

On Being Asked, Whence Is the Flower?

The flower as a representation of nature becomes the theme in this poem. The sentence marks the beginning of the poet's encounter with flower. The line above shows the high intensity he feels when seeing it. The capital letter which begins the word *Flower* emphasizes its glory. It indicates that the poet is in the process of contemplation, so that the question arises in his mind about the origin of the flower he finds.

In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes,

The setting in this poem is May. This month refers to the spring when the flowers bloom beautifully. Spring could also be interpreted as rebirth, renewal, a spirit to start the day. The wind breeze breaks the silence of the soul which encourages a person to move. The word wind as part of nature is presented to complete the central theme of this poem.

I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods,

The point of view in this poem is the first person singular I which can refer to the poet. In this line, the poet underlines the type of flower he finds, Rhodora which only grows in the northeastern part of America with a purple color. The wood is the location in which the flower is found. Wood could also be interpreted as a place for seclusion, gaining serenity, peace, and freedom from all the crowd of the city with all its conventions or rules. Emerson mentions wood to highlight the intense connection between himself and nature. Rhodora gives a special experience to a wanderer in the wood related to his soul.

*Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook,
To please the desert and the sluggish brook.*

Even though Rhodora is blooming without leaves, these flowers color the dark, humid, and dirty corner of the wood. The flower brings happiness to desert and mossy puddles. It indicates that the existence of the flower gives advantage to its surroundings. Desert refers to a wild and uninhabited place. Only those who dare to take a risk visit this place.

*The purple petals, fallen in the pool,
Made the black water with their beauty gay;*

Black puddle becomes the background of the violet shades of Rhodora. The fallen flower petals which beautify the black water contain self-sacrifice connotation. A sacrifice to bring goodness to others and environment.

*Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool,
And court the flower that cheapens his array.*

In addition to the flower of Rhodora, the poet also explores the natural beauty of America by mentioning the red bird known having the beautiful feathers and strong voice. The poet does not mention explicitly the name of the red bird to emphasize its shades. The bird is known as Cardinal bird which could be found in America. The above poem shows that the light red color of the feathers still could not compete the color and beauty of Rhodora.

*Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why
This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,*

Emerson seems talking to Rhodora. In this line, he mentions sages or wise man who is curious to know why the beauty of Rhodora is wasted in the world. The poet stresses the ignorance of people about the importance of intuition and feeling when confronted with nature.

*Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing,
Then Beauty is its own excuse for being:*

The word dear further exhibits the intense relation between the poet and Rhodora. Eyes are created to see the universe, but most people do not use them to enjoy and discover the beauty of nature.

Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!

The poet compares the beauty of Rhodora and rose. But Rhodora is freer by growing in the wild nature while the rose is identical to the clean and well-maintained environment.

*I never thought to ask, I never knew:
But, in my simple ignorance, suppose
The self-same Power that brought me there brought you.*

The poet insists that his ignorance leads him to contemplate about a power over the universe which drives the flower and the poet to be in the same place. Capital letter which begins the word Power refers to God. The end of this poem confirms the element of transcendentalism embraced by the romantic poet. Rhodora and the poet originate from the same power that is God. The poet connects man and nature to affirm that every living object has the same divine essence. The last line is the answer to the question which starts this poem *On Being Asked, Whence Is the Flower?*

The Worldview of Ralph Waldo Emerson

The structure of the poem above expresses Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendental worldview. As one of the most influential figures among transcendentalists, Emerson was greatly influenced by the people around him. Emerson's family played the significant role in the development of his spirituality. His father educated him with a ritualistic religious education, on the other hand, his mother and aunt emphasized the practical aspects of religion as well as the importance of being an open-minded person (Wilson, 2000: 51). Emerson's decision to be a clergyman was driven by his anxiety over the religious institution at the time. He realized that the doctrine of the church had restricted himself and society in general to think and act freely as individuals. He even dared to criticize the church's policy which did not give significant contribution to society. Besides, through his teaching activities, he was finally able to redefine the essence of religion and the interrelation between God, man, and nature.

Emerson chose to live in Concord, where his ancestors lived, the place which offered peace, natural beauty, and other fascinating things in Boston (Wilson, 2000: 55). The natural beauty of Concord greatly inspired Emerson in his writings. The elements of nature are clearly seen in his poem *The Rhodora*. Emerson constantly emphasized the connection between man and the universe and its divine attributes. In addition, through his works, he tried to break dogma and norms and to formulate new ideas and philosophies.

For Frederic Henry Hedge's encouragement, a group of people then initiated to get together to discuss theological and moral subjects. The group became known as the Transcendental Club, an informal organization of prominent transcendentalists in Boston (Holman, 1980: 449). Emerson's transcendental belief developed since the establishment of the Transcendental Club. The group offered a new idea as a reaction to a number of social, political, and cultural problems at that time.

Furthermore, Emerson engaged himself as an abolitionist when the problem of slavery arose in Concord around 1830. The Concord Society played an important role as an anti-slavery community in the Middlesex region. Emerson's life was dedicated to support the lower-class people who are unfairly treated. He came from a middle-class family and had a great hope of bringing about change in society (Wilson, 2000: 63). Emerson's philosophy of transcendentalism emphasizes morality and humanism. Line 4-7 of *The Rhodora* represents the goal of transcendentalist to spread goodness and to struggle for equality in society. Furthermore, through the notion of transcendentalism, He asserts individuality and self-confidence to fight for truth. Emerson highlights Rhodora, wood, and wild nature through his poems to show the importance of individual to be bold and to stand on his own even if he must alienate himself from the crowd and dominant ideas. This is related to self-reliance in transcendentalism. For Emerson, man has infinite freedom and ability. He believes that spirituality is not obtained through religious rituals and dogmas since man and nature have the spirit of divinity. Transcendentalism is the unity of the world and God.

More importantly, Emerson's thought of transcendentalism was strongly influenced by his reading on Asian text. The translation religious text of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Islam contributed to his spiritual belief. He understood

that Asian spiritual knowledge could change the human's life and civilization which transcended American and European thought. The thinkers then believed that everyone had the essence of divinity without intermediary such as dogmatic religious institution. People experienced spirituality through nature (Lewis and Bicknell, 2011: 12-16).

Moreover, other research found that Emerson specifically studied Indian and Buddhism text. Buddhism preached spiritual enlightenment through intuition. Emerson and other thinkers tried to discover another spiritual alternative from eastern thought as their disappointment on the advance of technology which has destroyed humanity. Transcendentalism occurs as a belief that everyone is inherently good and emotion should be a basis of social relationship. Individualism and self-reliance were the values of transcendentalism which derived from Zen Buddhism teaching (Jue, 2013: 1-24). It was inevitable that industrial and science revolution which began in 18th century drove sudden transformation in American life, people relied more on technology than direct social contact. People were selfishly pursuing materialism and behave inhumanely. Social thinkers and figures at the time offered transcendentalism philosophy as the best guidance of the problematic life.

Emerson's approach to oriental text brought him to spiritual truth. He reproduced religious text in the form of literary works. He emphasizes on self-transcendence and spiritual dimension apart from any religious rituals. Tradition and religious institution are corrupt in the perspective of Emerson. On the other side, he found morality and supreme beauty in the oriental culture (Versluis, 1993: 51&78). To sum up, Emerson's transcendentalism belief was originated from Eastern text he read which later formulated the ideas of self-reliance, individualism and non-conformist.

Social Structure of the Poem *The Rhodora*

At the time around the creation of *The Rhodora*, the chaos over religious beliefs drove Transcendentalism in America. The role of individuals was questioned. Transcendentalism occurred as a reaction to Boston Unitarianism. Transcendentalists refused to believe in God through Bible. Unitarianism was influenced by Enlightenment in the 18th century which asserted that bible could be studied rationally like any other text. Transcendentalism went beyond Unitarianism and expressed its philosophical value that a person only needed to look within himself subjectively to discover the truth and to gain spiritual and moral beliefs (Wayne, 2006: vii).

Emerson stressed the importance to rely upon one's own self as he explained in the Divinity School Address: to go alone . . . to be a divine man. Transcendentalism believed in intuition as a guide to spiritual truth and posed the Over-Soul idea as a force which guided humans in the universe. Transcendentalists viewed the world as an entities consisting of God, man, and nature as a unity that work together toward truth and perfection. The essence of transcendentalism were spiritualism and humanism. A process of identifying oneself and behaving based on the belief of individual subjective truths or intuition (Wayne, 2006: viii). Transcendentalism criticized Enlightenment's rationalism and institutional authority and even bible teaching as the source and guidance of truth. Transcendentalism affirmed that individual was the center of morality and spirituality in the universe.

Transcendentalism suggested the idea of non-conformity, self-reliance and self-expression. Transcendentalists believed that humans' spirituality could arise through nature not dogmatic religious rituals. Therefore, one must believe in his own thoughts, feelings and emotions as reflection of universal truth. Thus, transcendentalism was a philosophy of subjectivity that highlighted the individual's intuition beyond rational thought or formal religious teaching. In other words, transcendentalists believed that there was a universal truth which drove the universe, the truth not contained in any particular text or tradition, yet every individual found universal truth in different ways through his own thoughts and experiences. Transcendentalism in America offered innovations in philosophical, spiritual, and social aspects and solutions to the problems caused by major changes in society such as industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and westward expansion. Most transcendentalists considered themselves as social reformers. They believed that society could change (Wayne, 2006: viii-ix). Spiritualism in the view of transcendentalism was a belief of the unity of world and God. Spirituality could be obtained through human and nature relations not dogmatic religious activities. For transcendentalism, man simply needed to follow his intuition to gain the truth.

Many Transcendentalists did lend their voices and their time to the most significant reform causes of their time, such as education, labor rights, women's rights, and the abolition of slavery. In fact, Transcendentalist philosophical concerns, such as the commitments to individual freedom, self-development, and social progress, helped shape the issues and focus of those reform efforts (Wayne, 2006: ix).

Emerson said that everyone had a moral responsibility to spread goodness and to give benefits and contributions to the people around him. Transcendentalism was the belief that man could intuitively transcend the boundaries of the senses and logic to obtain truth (Holman, 1980: 450). Derived from the belief that every individual had goodness and morality in him, transcendentalists were actively involved in solving a number of social problems. Man should always follow his inner voice and stand on his principles to fight for the truth

Conclusion

The Rhodora is an expression of Transcendentalism worldview. This poem presents the intense relation of man and nature. Spirituality is obtained through the bonds of man and the universe. God, man, and nature are one unity. Transcendentalism emphasizes the role of the individual in the world and offers the idea that intuition is the only guide to spiritual truth. As part of American society, especially as a transcendentalist, Emerson offers the idea of transcendentalism in *The Rhodora* to highlight individuality, spirituality, and humanity. Rhodora represents the spirit of the transcendentalists who uphold the individual's infinite freedom and ability and the importance of intuition and understanding about the universe, as well as courage and kindness to give change and benefit to the environment. Above all, speaking about recentering Asian cultures, and ideas in the 21st Century is definitely possible since history shows that Asian texts, cultures, and tradition have a great influence over western philosophy specially in 18th and 19th century America.

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