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Caitlin Cater
University of Pittsburgh Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

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Keywords
Beat movement, Transcendentalism, American Literature
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Caitlin Cater
University of Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Introduction

In their intellectual history of post-war America, Jamison and Eyerman identify the Beat movement as one of several instrumental forces behind the societal transformations of the 1960s. Specifically, the authors credit Allen Ginsberg and his colleagues with helping to “shift the meaning of culture from its rationalizing and civilizing connotations to the more communal notion of collective experience” (Seeds of the Sixties 158-9). Indeed, such aims are clearly manifest in the literature of the Beat generation. Their works are ripe with
observations regarding the deleterious effects of society on
the individual, as well as ideas about the proper relationship
between man and his society. Jack Kerouac’s novels, for
example, point to the irony in achieving middle-class status
in America. The writer notes the following:

Americans consume production and
therefore have to work for the privilege of
consuming, all that crap they didn’t really
want anyway such as refrigerators, TV
sets, cars, at least new fancy cars, certain
hair oils and deodorants and general
junk you finally always see a week later in
the garbage anyway, all of them
imprisoned in a system of work, produce,
consume, work, produce, consume….
(Dharma Bums 73)

For Kerouac, this obsessive consumption – ostensibly a sign
of success and a conduit for happiness – merely provides an
empty distraction, which ultimately exacerbates the feelings
of loneliness and desire that are supposedly relieved through
the acquisition of material goods.

Similarly, Ginsberg’s poem, “Howl,” describes how
society, with its narrowly defined standards of acceptable
behavior and relentless preoccupation with conformity and
consistency, is actually harmful to its individual members:

What sphinx of cement and aluminum
bashed open their skulls and ate up
their brains and imagination?
Moloch whose mind is pure machinery!
Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies!
They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven! Pavements, trees, radios, tons! lifting the city to Heaven which exists and is everywhere about us!
Visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles! ecstasies! gone down the American river!
Real holy laughter in the river! They saw it all! the wild eyes! the holy yells! They bade farewell! They jumped off the roof! to solitude! waving! carrying flowers! Down to the river! into the street! (l.79-93)

By likening society to a malevolent deity who is the object of sacrificed children, Ginsberg emphasizes both his antipathy towards the increasingly pervasive mass culture and his fear of its deleterious impact on mankind. In effect, the poet suggests that, whether trying to meet the demands of society or to cope with its pressures, man is driven towards extreme means of escape and, ultimately, to self-destruction.

The Beats confront these forces by reinterpreting conventional ideas about the relationship between man and his society. The writers show little concern for reforming society so as to live comfortably within its confines; rather, their works reveal a perpetual interest in means of eluding
society, so as to strengthen one’s awareness of his inner self. Ginsberg, Kerouac, and their peers systematically reject cultural standards and institutions, while promoting self-reliance, a personally relevant beliefs system, and first-hand experience as vital alternatives. With such messages, the Beats established a new context for social criticism – one that emphasized the authority of the self, rather than society, in determining one’s needs, interests, and desires. This proved particularly resonant with and useful to a generation of Americans searching for meaningful existence amid the rigid, impersonal social structures of their era. The civil rights and women’s movements, for example, were aimed at reforming society; but they were also fundamentally driven by a burgeoning attentiveness to the authority of the self and the arbitrary nature of societal power structures – notions that were in part popularized by the literature of the Beat Generation.\(^1\) Thus, the Beat movement inspired and reaffirmed new ways of thinking about the individual and his place in society.

While these ideas motivated unprecedented change in American culture, the Beat movement is not the first instance of such views in the American literary tradition. A century earlier, the American Transcendentalists established a similar framework for thinking about the relationship between man and society. In his essay, “Self-Reliance,” Ralph Waldo Emerson asserts, “These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members” (21).
Henry David Thoreau’s works likewise urge readers not to support the government “machine” or succumb to the “civilizing” demands of society. The writer asserts, “We are provincial, because we do not find at home our standards, – because we do not worship truth, but the reflection of truth, – because we are warped and narrowed by an exclusive devotion to trade and commerce and manufactures and agriculture and the like, which are but means, and not the end” (“Life without Principle” 87). Underlying these claims is the writer’s belief that, by engaging in the trivialities of a system obsessed with progress and prosperity, man loses sight of his most valuable resource – his self.

Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman corroborates and further develops the ideas of his fellow Transcendentalists – particularly those concerning the value of self-knowledge, first-hand experience, and a universal spiritual community. He dismisses external influences, including such venerated figures as priests and professors, as superfluous diversions, and demands that the reader assume primary responsibility in his pursuit of knowledge. At the beginning of his poem, he declares, “You shall no longer take things at second or third hand….nor look through the eyes of the dead….nor feed on the spectres in books, / You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me, / You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself” (“Song of Myself” l.27-9). These lines confirm the poet’s disdain for secondary sources of knowledge and fortify his understanding of the self as the central authority. Like the Beats, the Transcendentalists recognize the
potentially corrosive effects of society on the individual and look to evade such effects through greater self-reliance.

In light of these parallels, I propose that Jamison and Eyerman’s assessment of the Beats is equally well-applied to the American Transcendentalists. Although separated by a century of political, economic, and technological change, the members of these movements express similar discontent with their respective societies’ increasing materialism at the expense of more sustainable values. Despite their disillusionment with society, however, neither the Beats nor the Transcendentalists advocate widespread civic reform as a solution to its ills. On the contrary, one finds throughout their works a rejection of mass culture and the attendant desire to live independently of its beliefs and customs. The writers hope to elude the obfuscating tendencies and arbitrary limitations of societal norms by looking within the self to determine one’s true needs and desires.

Furthermore, the two movements propose comparable, unconventional solutions to the crisis they perceive; each writer maintains a seemingly paradoxical relationship between man and society, in which the individual exists as an independent, self-reliant entity that is simultaneously aware of and deferent to his status as one part of a spiritual, universal whole. The aim, in all cases, is to motivate personal, fundamental changes in the way that man relates to his self and his surroundings. Accordingly, both movements emphasize the importance of making internal changes to the individual – through self-reliance, a personally relevant beliefs system, and first-hand experience
– before pursuing external reforms to society. Thus, both the Beats and the Transcendentalists express confidence that change from within radiates outward, thereby creating a society grounded in solid, sustainable values.

The result, for both the Transcendentalists and the Beats, is a body of literature that explores new ideas about religion, sexuality, scholarship, and even writing itself. These, in turn, demand reconsideration of conventional American values and practices. The effects of this are eventually manifest in the contemporaneous social critiques and – particularly with the Beat Generation – countercultural movements, which denounce the established social and political orders, while calling for a more “authentic” approach to society and the self. Thus, both movements embrace the mission that Jamison and Eyerman assigned to the Beats and advance it through their literary endeavors.

The writers’ oft-considered ideas about the self, spirituality, and nature provide further evidence for the essential literary and cultural relationship between American Transcendentalism and the Beat movement. Studying this connection provides a way of understanding how American society is interpreted and presented in a literary context. Moreover, it provides a framework for thinking about the long-term legacy of the artist’s perception of American society and his role in shaping that environment. I maintain throughout this paper that the Beats are not simply an extension of American Transcendentalism. However, similarities between the two movements’ worldviews suggest a continuity between two seemingly disparate periods in
American culture, which perhaps extends throughout the American literary tradition. Although their discourses converge at numerous points, I am particularly concerned with representations of the aforementioned concepts in American Transcendentalism and Beat Generation literature because, taken together, the writers’ ideas about nature, spirituality, and the self comprise the primary aspects of a broader philosophical system around which the members of each movement cohere.²

Cultural Impetus

The American Transcendentalists’ concepts of the self and self-knowledge run contrary to the prevailing epistemological theories of their era. Although by the mid-1800s more than a century old, John Locke’s materialist-empiricist views, along with David Hume’s skepticism, still dominated mainstream intellectual currents. In particular, Locke’s understanding of the mind as a “tabula rasa” and his consequent claim that all we can know is that which we glean from sense experiences after birth, as well as Hume’s assertion that “the most lively thought is still inferior to the dullest sensation” (Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, II.1), confirmed the primacy of external phenomena in acquiring information about one’s self and one’s surroundings, while undermining the value (and very existence) of intuition.

American Transcendentalism developed out of an opposing school, known as Idealism, which recognizes that there exists “a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through
which experience was acquired; that there were intuitions of the mind itself…” (Emerson, “The Transcendentalist”). This philosophy, which undermines the empiricist’s concern with the material world, particularly influenced the Transcendentalists, who lament that society’s increasing obsessions with progress and prosperity have displaced more genuine values, such as self-reliance and meaningful spirituality. Throughout their works, Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman demonstrate that their variations of Idealism extend beyond the realm of abstract ideas to provide a practical model for how best to live in such an environment.

Ultimately, the members of this movement revere the self as the moral, spiritual, and intellectual center of the universe and, accordingly, elevate intuitive faculties above any capacity for reason or sensation. Distinguishing between externally-imposed sense information and internally-derived awareness, Thoreau asserts, “My desire for knowledge is intermittent; but my desire to bathe my head in atmospheres unknown to my feet is perennial and constant” (“Walking” 113). While they recognize that experiences in the material world – specifically nature – can be instructive, the Transcendentalists also maintain that we can only have direct, immediate knowledge of the contents of our own minds: “Mind is the only reality, of which men and all other natures are better or worse reflectors. Nature, literature, history are only subjective phenomena” (Emerson, “The Transcendentalist”). In the Transcendentalist system, therefore, reality is defined by internal thoughts, feelings,
and perceptions. As a result, one cannot hope to find truth or self-awareness in external objects.

Consequently, the Transcendentalists hold that all meaningful knowledge stems from self-knowledge. Emerson writes, “Nothing at last is sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself and you shall have the suffrage of the world” (“Self-Reliance” 21). This attests to the writer’s belief that all one needs to understand the world is contained within the self. One need not turn to books or scholars; rather, he must rely on his intuition and draw from self-reflection. Whitman inspires his readers with like encouragement:

My right hand points to landscapes of continents, and a plain public road.
Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you,
You must travel it for yourself.
It is not far….it is within reach,
You are also asking me questions, and I hear you; I answer that I cannot answer...
you must find out for yourself. (“Song of Myself” l.1206-20)

Whitman suggests that, even if he has the answers, it is useless for him to share them – the information is meaningful only when it is obtained for oneself, first-hand. As with the preceding passage, this one reminds the reader that his own self is his greatest source of knowledge and understanding.
One hundred years later, the Beats propagate corresponding notions of the self as the supreme moral, spiritual, and intellectual authority. In a 1963 interview, Ginsberg averred, “Knowledge comes from doing what comes naturally” (*Spontaneous Mind* 12). He also expresses this idea in his poetry, by celebrating the individual who is “rejected yet confessing out the soul to conform to the rhythm of thought in his naked and endless head” (“Howl” 1.75). Similarly, the primary character in Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums* scorns any attempts to obtain truth through external stimuli. He insists, “[I]t’s with your six senses that you’re fooled into believing not only that you have six senses, but that you contact an actual outside world with them” (24). The Beats also exalt the “man of solitude who could take off by himself and live purely and true to himself” (*Dharma Bums* 16). In these passages, and at numerous other points throughout their works, the members of this movement further substantiate the Transcendentalists’ view that an individual need not rely on society for a meaningful existence; instead, one must focus on spirituality and first-hand experience in nature as the means of fostering and supporting a life centered on the self.

But the Beats’ views do not descend directly from American Transcendentalism, or even Idealism. Rather, Ginsberg, Kerouac, and their peers formulated their ideas in response to a burgeoning awareness that their society, reacting to the frightening and contradictory realities of modern life, was gripped by “psychic and moral rigidity”
According to John Tytell, the atmosphere was marked by “coercion and conspiracy”:

The nation’s legacy of individuality had been changed to a more standardized expectation of what constituted ‘Americanism.’ Traditional tolerance of ideological difference had been subverted to a passion for organization and political similitude. It was a bitter and ironic distortion of our history: the character of the country had always been as various as its topography, and the lack of homogeneity meant that Americans had to work to develop a national consciousness resilient enough to embrace the aspirations of multitudes…Some vital ingredient of the ‘American Dream’ was warped and out of control. (7)

As this passage indicates, the dynamics of post-WWII America, defined in part by a fervent interest in social and political unity, gave rise to conservative cultural values, which severely limited the range of acceptable thoughts and behaviors in society. The Beats reject such values as hollow, impersonal, and destructive. Their writings highlight the inconsistencies between the idealized notion of a “consensus” society and the daily realities of oppression and ignorance in America. Ginsberg opens his poem, “America,” in defeat: “America I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing” (l.1), attesting to the parasitic effects of society on the
individual. And in Kerouac’s *On the Road*, Sal relates, “Bull had a sentimental streak about the old days in America…the country was wild and brawling and free, with abundance and any kind of freedom for everyone. His chief hate was Washington bureaucracy…” (144), thus suggesting that society’s attempt to streamline and regulate its beliefs and practices curtails individual freedom and creativity. Such observations inform the Beat generation’s counter-culture attitudes and inspire their reverence for the self.

The Beats are also concerned with the lack of authenticity present in the ideas and institutions that fuel contemporary society. According to Ginsberg, “[e]verybody in America [is] a thief living off thievery from man or nature, thus secretive & shamed of inner thought” (qtd. in Charters 333). This, the writer fears, effectively fosters the attitudes of complacency and dependency that the members of this movement so despise. In addition, William S. Burroughs observes that society has become so homogenized and individuals so deeply indoctrinated with its beliefs that “the study of thinking machines teaches us more about the brain than we can learn by introspective methods. Western man is externalizing himself in the form of gadgets” (*Naked Lunch* 22). His assertion further emphasizes the Beats’ scorn for the vacuous, robotic nature of a materialistic culture obsessed with consistency and conformity.

The Transcendentalists share this discontent. Among other topics, their essays lament society’s lack of earnest scholarship, weak social conscience, and institutionalization of religious faith. Regarding his society’s apathetic response
to slavery, Thoreau observes, “There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing…” (“Civil Disobedience” 5). This dynamic illuminates Thoreau’s claim that the pressures of an authoritative mass ultimately serve to justify hypocrisy and complacency in individuals. The result is a culture in which “our life is not so much threatened as our perception” (Emerson, “Experience” 83). That is, while societal pressures do not put individuals in mortal danger, they do demand a livelihood that inevitably obscures man’s genuine understanding of his self and his position in the world. Even more egregiously, society’s impersonal demands – attempts to maintain order and achieve consensus, while fostering progress and prosperity – create a dynamic in which conformity and consistency are virtues. Furthermore, these circumstances make it difficult for individuals to not partake of the group mentality and collective practices while still functioning inside society.

**Inherent Authority of the Self**

These circumstances lead both the Beats and the Transcendentalists to conclude that one must live outside of society if he is to live rightly; that is, if he is to live in accordance with his self. As John Clellon Holmes notes, “the absence of personal and social values is to [the Beats], not a revelation shaking the ground beneath them, but a problem demanding a day-to-day solution. How to live
seems to them much more crucial than why” (“This is the Beat Generation”). That is, the Beats are not content simply to lament the ills of society; they are also seeking viable alternatives to its corrupted, obfuscating environment. For these individuals, this means locating a set of meaningful, authentic principles by which to live – the Beats feel that one may elude the “valueless abyss” of society by finding something to believe in. In the end, they realize that, in a society which offers nothing authentic to believe in, the only thing one can believe in is oneself.

The Beats indicate that one may establish a meaningful existence by living in accordance with his intuitive needs and desires – by regarding the self as the moral, spiritual, and intellectual center of the universe – rather than the external pressures of society. Ginsberg implores, “America how can I write a holy litany in your silly mood” (“America” l.54), underscoring the lack of substance behind American values. Further, the artists urge readers to trespass against society’s norms. The heroes of Ginsberg’s poem, “Howl,” are those who “studied Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross telepathy and bop kabala because the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet in Kansas” (l.24), as well as those “who copulated ecstatic and insatiate with a bottle of beer and a sweetheart a package of cigarettes a candle and fell off the bed, and continued along the floor and down the hall and ended fainting on the wall with a vision of ultimate cunt and come eluding the last gyzym of consciousness” (l.41). That is, they are those individuals who pursue their instinctive needs and desires, without regard to
how closely those requirements align with those outlined by society.

The Transcendentalists convey analogous views: Emerson declares, “It is only as a man puts off all foreign support, and stands alone, that I see him to be strong and to prevail” (“Self-Reliance” 37), and Thoreau writes, “I might pursue some path, however solitary and narrow and crooked, in which I could walk with love and reverence” (“Life without Principle” 81). Like the Beats, the Transcendentalists are wary of any forces that might undermine the authority of the self and thus interfere with one’s ability to live according to his internal dictates. Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman identify contemporary society as one such influence, as it inherently pursues an amalgamated agenda of many people’s needs, desires, and interests and thus cannot accurately reflect or serve those of any particular individual. As Emerson describes it, society renders man unable to live by or for himself; he easily becomes dependent upon, and eventually incapacitated by, its superficial structures: “The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on crutches, but lacks so much support of muscle. He has a fine Geneva watch, but he fails of the skill to tell the hour by the sun” (“Self-Reliance” 36). The Transcendentalists assert that this situation ultimately impedes an individual’s access to the true moral, spiritual, and intellectual authority – his self. In addition, Thoreau insists, “Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn”
(“Civil Disobedience” 8). In effect, this passage urges the individual to ignore the dicta of society, on the grounds that they obscures man’s access to genuine truth and self-awareness, thereby hindering his understanding of his self and his position in the world.

Members of both movements further emphasize the importance of the self through their approaches to writing itself. Many of the major works produced by the Beats and the Transcendentalists begin with “I,” and nearly all of them are written in the first person. Use of such perspective further underscores the central role of the self in these writers’ works. Additionally, it illuminates their understanding of the fundamental connection among all things. Perhaps the most notorious example is Whitman’s opening to “Song of Myself”: “I celebrate myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you (l.1-3).

Furthermore, Kerouac scorns the practice of revision and details his methods for eliciting raw, authentic expression in “The Essentials of Spontaneous Prose.” His notion that “language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words” (57) articulates the Beats’ desire to access and convey, unadulterated, the contents of one’s inner consciousness. Thoreau advocates a similar approach throughout his journals. In an entry dated March 7, 1838, he emphasizes the value of spontaneous expression: “We should not endeavor coolly to analyze our thoughts, but, keeping the pen even and parallel with the current, make an accurate transcript of them. Impulse is, after all, the best
linguist, and for his logic, if not conformable to Aristotle, it cannot fail to be most convincing” (*A Writer’s Journal* 1). While his essays are obviously revised and polished, Thoreau demonstrates awareness that the most genuine—and revealing—sentences are actually those that flow uncensored from the consciousness, as opposed to those that are parsed and reworked so as to fit some institutionally-defined prose structure.

Thus, the Beats and the Transcendentalists arrive at parallel conceptions of the self as the supreme authority and consequently conclude that an individual need not rely on society for a meaningful existence. In fact, the members of these movements indicate that one cannot expect to sustain a life guided by principles of self-reliance and independent inquiry while still within the confines of society. Despite their temporal and cultural distance, the members of these movements also propose comparable means of reconciling this disconnect. Above all, they focus on spirituality and first-hand experiences in nature as means of fostering and supporting a life centered on the self.

**Parts of a Spiritual Whole**

Consequent to their understanding of the self as the moral, spiritual, and intellectual center of the universe, the Beats and the Transcendentalists reject organized religious worship and eschew the notion of God as a superior being. In “Song of Myself,” Whitman summons his readers:

> And I call to mankind, Be not curious about God,
> For I who am curious about each am not
curious about God
I hear and behold God in every object, yet I
understand God not in the least,
Nor do I understand who there can be more
wonderful than myself. (l.1271-5)

Kerouac reiterates these sentiments throughout *Dharma Bums*; at one point, the main character exclaims, “But you’re getting these silly convictions and conceptions out of nowhere, don’t you realize all this life is just a dream? Why don’t you just relax and enjoy God? God is you, you fool!” (84). Both passages highlight the Beats’ and the Transcendentalists’ shared belief that the wisdom and serenity for which one typically turns to religion reside within the self. In addition, the writers recognize that one cannot ascertain higher truths about the world and his position in it through external sources.

Such views, however, do not prevent the members of these movements from embracing spiritual beliefs or even from acknowledging the existence of God. On the contrary, as Stephen Prothero observes, the Beats and their Transcendentalist predecessors “aimed to make contact with the sacred on the nonverbal, trans-conceptual level of intuition and feeling” (“On the Holy Road” 220). The writers conceive of a spiritual system in which the individual accesses higher truths through deeper awareness of his self. In this way, he arrives at his own, personally relevant beliefs, rather than those expounded by the “dead faiths” of institutionalized religion. Whitman asserts, ““Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am
touched from;/ The scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer
than prayer,/ This head is more than churches or bibles or
creeds” (“Song of Myself” 1.526-8).

This approach also provides an individual insight
into man’s proper relationship with the world. Although the
Beats and the Transcendentalists denounce society and even
rebuff certain members, they do not deny their connection
to these entities. In fact, the writers share an understanding
of – and reverence for – the fundamental equality and
inextricable unity of all things. Emerson speaks of “that
Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man’s particular
being is contained and made one with all other; that common
heart…Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the
wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and
particle is equally related; the eternal ONE” (“The Over-
soul” 52). This conception relegates the ethereal to the
same status as the material; in effect, no thing is greater or
lesser than any other thing. By extension, the Beats and the
Transcendentalists conclude that “we are all one Self with
one being, one consciousness” (Allen Verbatim 5). Thus,
Despite their self-centered, highly individualistic portrayals
of man in relation to society, none of the writers conceives of
the individual as truly independent of his surroundings, nor
isolated from the spiritual realm.

Western religious traditions conventionally present
the soul as an eternal, immaterial link between the mortal
and the divine. As such, this entity eclipses the ephemeral,
sinful body. However, consistent with their egalitarian
sentiments, the Beats and the Transcendentalists refuse
the traditional dichotomy between physical and spiritual and deny the inherent inferiority of the former to the latter. Ginsberg’s “Footnote to ‘Howl’” affirms this by elevating the physical world – even its stereotypically depraved elements – into the spiritual realm:

Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!
Holy! Holy!
Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!
The world is holy! The soul is holy! The
skin is holy!
The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and
hand and asshole holy!
Everything is holy! everybody’s holy!
everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity!
Everyman’s an angel!
The bum’s as holy as the seraphim! the
madman is holy as you my soul are holy!
(l.1-6)

Moreover, the writers maintain that one must understand both the body and soul in order to understand the self. To a society disgusted by the corporeal and accustomed to delicate euphemisms, Whitman relates, “Knowing the perfect fitness and equanimity of things, while they discuss I am silent, and go bathe and admire myself. / Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean, / Not an inch or particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest” (l.47-9). Such revelations demonstrate that the poet embraces physical experience as an essential part of spirituality. This, in turn, implies that one
must literally know his body in order to achieve spiritual communion with his soul, a condition that the Beats and the Transcendentalists confirm throughout their works.

For the members of these movements, the body and the soul ultimately represent complementary parts of a single unit: the self. While each manifests itself in a distinct way – one physical and ephemeral; the other ethereal and eternal – these entities concomitantly enhance an individual’s spiritual context for understanding his self and his position in the world. As a consequence, one recognizes the inherent equality and interconnectivity among the body, the soul, and the self. In *Dharma Bums*, for example, the writer asserts that “the substance of my bones and their bones and the bones of dead men in the earth of rain at night is the common individual substance that is everlastingly tranquil and blissful” (105). By extension, an individual discerns more general, yet analogous, relationships between the physical and the spiritual realms. In *On the Road*, the same writer predicts, “Mankind will someday realize that we are actually in contact with the dead and with the other world, whatever it is” (153). Thus, the body-soul-self triad, described throughout the Beats’ and the Transcendentalists’ works, serves as a metaphor for explaining their spiritual systems on the whole and, in doing so, underscores the principles of unity and equality central to those systems.

The traditional concepts of God and religion are incompatible with this form of spirituality because their hierarchical structures separate, irreconcilably, the source of spiritual awareness from its beholders, thereby undermining
the egalitarian relationship among all beings that the
Beats and the Transcendentalists maintain. Therefore,
while members of both movements incorporate God into
their spiritual systems, they refuse to acknowledge him as
superior to any mortal. Emerson illuminates this point in
_Nature_, when he claims, “I am part or particle of God…
master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance” (8). In
addition, Whitman declares, “I know that the hand of God is
the elderhand of my own, / And I know that the spirit of God
is the eldest brother of my own, / And that all the men ever
born are also my brothers….and the women my sisters and
lovers” (l.83-5), and he goes so far as to describe God as his
“loving bedfellow” (l.52).

Another important component to the Beats’ and the
Transcendentalists’ spiritual philosophies is their assertion
that there is no systematic approach to the uncertainties of
life. In light of their belief that we cannot base claims to
authority on evidence external to human consciousness, the
writers are content to acknowledge that some fundamental
questions must remain unanswered. They feel that it is
better to lack an explanation than to rely on dogma and
empty rhetoric and thus find additional reason to reject the
teachings of conventional religious authorities. According to
Whitman, “[l]ogic and sermons never convince, / The damp
of the night drives deeper into my soul” (“Song of Myself”
l. 652-3). For these artists, insights into spiritual matters are
only useful if they are obtained first-hand.

Here again, deviation from cultural norms attests
to the Beats’ and the Transcendentalists’ distrust of society
and its ability to support a meaningful existence. By rejecting institutionalized religion in favor of a personally-constructed spirituality, the members of this movement reinforce the authority of the self. The writers’ philosophies further undermine the claims to power of any external social structure. At the same time, the reader is reminded that contempt for society does not imply a disdain for humanity. Thus, although they condemn dependence upon the past and other external resources as trifling distractions from self-awareness, the Beats and the Transcendentalists simultaneously speak for a spiritual system that recognizes the eternal, transcendental connection among all things.

**Truths in Nature**

In his essay, “Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” Lynn White, Jr. describes the evolution of mankind’s functional and symbolic uses of nature throughout the world under the premise that “what we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship” (12). He notably observes that traditional Western views developed concomitantly with the rise of Christianity, and thus he considers contemporary Western approaches to nature to be outgrowths of beliefs derived from their long-standing religious traditions. In White’s opinion, these values have ultimately served to initiate and justify much of the environmental degradation that increasingly plagues the consciousnesses of many citizens. Specifically, he highlights the Judeo-Christian tradition’s anthropocentric attitude towards nature, which he feels generated the concept of man as master of nature as well as the accompanying notion
that nature exists solely for the purpose of serving man. For White, such perspectives became especially influential around the Transcendentalists’ era, when industrialization and rapidly-advancing technology reinforced systematic exploitation of the natural environment as a means to progress and prosperity. This led to the “emergence in widespread practice of the Baconian creed that scientific knowledge means technological power over nature…its acceptance as a normal pattern of action may mark the greatest event in human history since the invention of agriculture, and perhaps in nonhuman terrestrial history as well” (4-5). That is, the Industrial Revolution afforded, on a practicable level, broad implementation of this concept of man as master of nature, thus providing society with a tangible – albeit destructive – model for the relationship between man and nature. Thus, he declares, “We shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man” (14).

The Beats and the Transcendentalists depart from the conventional treatment of nature that White criticizes, and, in so doing, they provide alternative interpretations of the functional and symbolic uses of nature, which ultimately represent solutions to the problem White discusses in his essay. Of all the members of these movements, Emerson strays least from the traditional conception of nature. A minister by training, the writer affirms the servile role of nature with the fervency of one delivering a sermon to his congregation. He declares, “Nature is thoroughly
mediate. It is made to serve. It receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Saviour rode. It offers all its kingdoms to man as the raw material which he may mould into what is useful” (Nature 35). Comparable examples permeate the text. Between such passages, however, one identifies a distinct reverence for nature on the part of the author. In one instance, Emerson pronounces himself a “lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages” (8). This apparent contradiction illuminates the point of Emerson’s departure from the conventional Western view of man as master over nature. While the writer portrays nature as a tool for understanding the self and its surroundings and, in that sense, renders nature subservient, he also insists that we are to respect nature in virtue of its servitude. Contrary to societal convention, Emerson does not identify in this relationship license to exploit our natural resources; for him, to do so would be to efface a crucial means of self-awareness and spiritual understanding.

Thoreau, Whitman, and the Beats build upon Emerson’s slight departure from convention to reject entirely the notion of man as master of nature. They instead pursue an egalitarian relationship with the natural world, similar to the one that the members of these movements seek to maintain with all living things. In “Song of Myself,” Whitman intones:

This is the common air that bathes the globe.
This is the breath of laws and songs and
behaviour,
This is the tasteless water of souls….this is the true sustenance,
It is for the illiterate….it is for the judges of the supreme court….it is for the federal capitol and the state capitols. (l.359-62)

Whitman draws the “true sustenance” of life from a shared resource – nature – and then divides it among all types of people. In doing so, the poet demonstrates the egalitarian bonds uniting man with nature. Additionally, these writers emphasize that, in order to live independently of an imperfect, obfuscating society, individuals must be conscious of their consumption and conservative in their use of resources; nature, therefore, is not to be treated as an endlessly abundant reserve. With *Walden*, Thoreau endeavors to demonstrate that one may live a fulfilling life without material goods. He writes:

I was more independent than any farmer in Concord, for I was not anchored to a house or farm, but could follow the bent of my genius, which is a very crooked one, every moment. Beside being better off than they already, if my house had been burned or my crops had failed, I should have been nearly as well off as before. (37)

Together, these writers’ ideas are most closely aligned with those White believes will ameliorate the world’s current ecological crisis, as they impart a practical approach to a healthy relationship with nature: namely, economy, anti-
materialism, and an egalitarian relationship with one’s natural environment.

Regardless of particular differences among the individual authors, the Beats and the Transcendentalists nonetheless agree on several points which, taken together, depart from the traditional conceptions of nature. As such, they offer a potentially effective alternative to the destructive dynamic that White considers in his essay. First, “nature” refers to a physical entity, which includes “essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf” (*Nature* 5). In this sense, nature encompasses those elements and locations that exist outside of human culture. Thus, to be in nature is to effectively be outside of society. This is fundamentally important to the members of both movements, who are continually exploring means of eluding the trappings of society. Ginsberg recognized this with his response to the question, “What would you consider an ideal existence for yourself as a poet?”: “Retiring from the world, living in a mountain hut, practicing certain special meditation exercises half the day, and composing epics as the sun sets” (qtd. in Diggory, “Allen Ginsberg’s Urban Pastoral” 201).

Nature also affords a deeper understanding of the self as well as an individual’s relationship with his surroundings. Emerson explains that “the greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable” (*Nature* 9). Accordingly, the works of the Beats and the Transcendentalists reflect an understanding of nature as a
powerful anodyne to society’s deleterious effects. Kerouac, for example, exalts his experiences in nature throughout *On the Road*: “We bent down and began picking cotton. It was beautiful…it was beautiful kneeling and hiding in that earth. If I felt like resting I did, with my face on the pillow of brown moist earth. Birds sang an accompaniment. I thought I had found my life’s work…I was a man of the earth” (96-7). This passage highlights the beauty of the character’s natural surroundings as well as the self-authority and self-awareness that such an environment affords: if he is tired, he may rest without feeling pressure to meet a quota or keep up with fellow workers; similarly, his comment that he “was a man of the earth” illustrates recognition of his fundamental connection to nature. Nature, therefore, functions practically as an alternative to society and a means of achieving deeper self-awareness.

According to the Beats and the Transcendentalists, nature is a symbol of the self. Thus, knowing nature is an essential component to knowing the self. As Emerson describes, “every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of mind” (*Nature* 23). Therefore, “a life in harmony with nature, the love of truth and of virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text. By degrees we may come to know the primitive sense of the permanent objects of nature, so that the world shall be to us an open book…” (31). In their views, just as one achieves a deeper understanding of the individual self through physical intimacy with his own body, so one can also access higher truths about the universal
self by cultivating an intimate familiarity with the physical world at large.

The concept of nature is also used symbolically throughout the Beats’ and the Transcendentalists’ writings to signify that which is unbounded and unadulterated, as opposed to that which is regulated and rationalized. Thoreau takes nature to represent “absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil” (“Walking” 71). The Beats corroborate Thoreau’s distinction at many points throughout their writings. Particularly notable is their concept of the road and its use as a tool for escaping the confines of society. As such, the road acquires many of the rejuvenating and liberating qualities of nature. At the end of his poem denigrating American society, for example, Ginsberg declares, “America, I’m putting my queer shoulder to the wheel” (“America” l.73). Kerouac invokes these connotations when referencing the “streets of life” and “innocent road-eyes” (On the Road 107). In another example, one of his characters relates, “Our battered suitcases were piled on the sidewalk again; we had longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life” (On the Road 212). In the same book, Sal Paradise prepares for a cross-country journey by studying maps and travel guides. As a result, his first attempts at hitch-hiking fail; he is so preoccupied with following the “best” route, as outlined by the maps, that he subverts the inherent wisdom of his internal authority. It is only when he realizes that “it was [his] dream that screwed up, the stupid hearthside idea that it would be wonderful to follow one great red line across
America instead of trying various roads and routes” (11), and thus develops a respect for the free and unsystematic qualities of nature that he embarks on a meaningful journey.

For the Beats and the Transcendentalists, nature serves, in both practical and figurative capacities, as the means of eluding society while developing a deeper understanding of the essential relationship between man and the universe. As such, experiences in nature facilitate the awareness required for a life guided by self-reliance and independent inquiry.

**Conclusions**

Ideas about nature, spirituality, and the self are prominently represented in American Transcendentalism and Beat literature. These broad concepts are used both literally and symbolically to express the writers’ thoughts on identity and conformity, as the means of exploring the relationship between man and his society. Concomitant analysis of works from both movements reveals significant parallels between the Beats’ and the Transcendentalists’ impressions of society, as well as their conceptions of the individual. In particular, the members of these movements reveal a profound discontent with American culture and scorn their respective societies’ increasing emphasis on conformity and material prosperity at the expense of the self-governing individual. Despite such bitter disillusionment, however, one finds little concern with reforming society in Beat and Transcendentalist literature. Rather, the authors continually explore means of eluding society, promoting self-reliance, a personally relevant beliefs system, and first-hand
experience as means of doing so. Thus, the members of these movements view reforming one’s self and one’s relationship to his surroundings as more important than changing the prevailing social structures.

Such similarities raise questions about the relationship between American Transcendentalism and the Beat movement. In particular, they inspire curiosity as to whether the writers behind these movements are highlighting perpetual flaws in American society or whether the perceived ills are localized, exacerbated by transient cultural dynamics. This, in turn, raises broader questions about the role of the artist in society. Full investigations of these inquiries are beyond the scope of my current research, but I hope that my consideration of related questions – specifically the Beats’ and the Transcendentalists’ understanding of the relationship between the individual and his society, as revealed through their concepts of nature, spirituality, and the self – will contribute to that effort.

Finally, I would like to note that, despite the inwardly-directed nature of these movements, the Beats and the Transcendentalists still managed to effect change in their society. Their unconventional ideas and, in some cases, their original writing styles, helped to expand the realm of critical discourse concerned with the effects of society on the individual. Moreover, in their attempts to escape society, the Beats and the Transcendentalists emphasized the role of the self as the moral, spiritual, and intellectual center of the universe. To accommodate this notion, the writers demanded alternative approaches to religion, education, and sexuality,
among many other topics. In doing so, both movements created impetus for change by validating the authority of the self in determining one’s own needs, desires, and interests.
Notes

1 For additional discussion of the Beat Generation’s impact on American culture, see David Castronovo, *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit: Books from the 1950s that Made American Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004) as well as Jamison and Eyerman, *Seeds of the Sixties*.

2 It is important to note that American Transcendentalism and the Beat Movement are both inwardly focused movements that emphasize the impregnable authority of the self and one’s first-hand experiences with nature and spirituality. As a consequence, the ideas expounded by each author are not always consistent with those of the other authors in question. Each movement, therefore, amounts to a gathering of many distinct voices around a set of common ideas, which are uniquely expressed by the individual writers. I am more concerned with the ideas espoused by the broader movements than with the idiosyncratic positions of the individuals who represent them.


4 See, among others, Emerson’s essays: “The American Scholar” (1837); “The Over-Soul” (1841); and “Experience” (1844). See also Thoreau’s essays, “Slavery in Massachusetts” (1854); “A Plea for Captain John Brown”
(1860); and “Life without Principle” (1863); and Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* (1871).

5 Harold Fromm, similarly, describes how the Industrial Revolution affected humanity’s conception of its relationship to nature. Specifically, he notes that technology has afforded the illusion that man can control nature, and thus allows us to forget that our minds and bodies are fundamentally dependent upon natural support systems. See his essay, “From Transcendence to Obsolescence: A Route Map,” in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 30-39.
Works Cited


