
UNIT 7: RALPH WALDO EMERSON'S 'BRAHMA'

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7.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to

- recognize what is meant by the term 'transcendentalism'
- realize the important role of R.W. Emerson in American transcendentalism
- understand the meaning of the concepts 'karma' and 'maya' with relation to Indian philosophy
- comprehend *Brahma* as an expression of the philosophy of the East
- gain insights into how people perceive the cosmos and the functions and phenomena of Brahma, the god of creation

7.1 INTRODUCTION

7.1.2 What is Transcendentalism?

Transcendentalism, or American Transcendentalism, was a multi-faceted movement. It introduced freethinking in religion, intuitive idealism in

philosophy, individualism in literature, new spirit in social reforms, and new optimism in peoples' mind. This New England movement flourished in a period between 1830 and 1860. One of the beginning marks of this movement was the Transcendental Club meeting held at George Ripley's home in Boston in the fall of 1836. As an intellectual movement, Transcendentalism was influenced by Romanticism and post-Kantian idealism, and its major exponents were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Bronson Alcott. Initially, it started its journey as a religious movement, but shortly it addressed many other issues of the contemporary time.

The influence of Transcendentalism is clearly visible in many American movements – be it religious, literary, political, or philosophical. With regard to religion, it introduced freethinking and reasoning in understanding and practicing religion. In fact, it was the first revolt against historical Christianity as it rejected religious forms, creeds, rituals, and the literal explanations of scriptures. Instead, it aspired to reach for an authentic religious experience. Establishing an original relationship with God and the universe was among the main objectives of the movement. Rejecting religious formalities, Emerson in his "Divinity School Address" declared that "Whenever the pulpit is usurped by a formalist, then is the worshipper defrauded and disconsolate. We shrink as soon as the prayers begin, which do not uplift, but smite and offend us. It seemed strange that people should come to church" (138-39). Thus, Transcendentalism advocated religious experience based on intuition and an unmediated relationship with the universe and its Creator.

To the study of philosophy, Transcendentalism added the principles of idealism. In Emerson's opinion, Transcendentalism is what is left in a person's mind after he or she empties everything that comes from traditions. Along this line of understanding, Orestes Brownson defines Transcendentalism as "the recognition in man of the capacity of knowing truth intuitively," and George A. Ripley defines it as "the supremacy of mind over matter" (Boller 34-35). Furthermore, Emerson, in "The Transcendentalist," provides us with the most succinct definition of Transcendentalism as an idealistic philosophy: "What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism."

In addition to being an emblem of intuitive religious experience and an idealistic philosophy, Transcendentalism may be described as a doctrine of reform. In the April issue of *The Dial* [transcendentalist magazine] in 1841, Emerson wrote, "In the history of the world the doctrine of Reform had never such scope as at the present hour." Almost all members of the Transcendentalist group responded to various social reforms, e.g., women's rights, temperance, abolitionism, children's aid, prison reform, and educational reform. With regard to social reform, Emerson always believed in two parties in society: "the party of the Past and the party of the Future; the Establishment and the Movement" (Boller 100). In addition to ushering in various social reforms, Transcendentalism introduced a romantic and individualistic movement to the field of literary studies. Defying the traditional ways of looking at humans as social subjects, it re-conceptualized individuals as autonomous agents and redefined reality.

In short, Transcendentalism as a literary movement influenced modern American literature.

From another perspective, Transcendentalism was a movement of cosmic optimism; all members of this group were profoundly optimistic. In *The Dial*, Thoreau wrote that "Surely joy is the condition of life" (Tauber 24). He further illustrated his optimism through the following words: "I believe something, and there is nothing else but that. I know that I am...I know that the enterprise is worthy. I know that things work well. I have heard no bad news" (Tauber 24). Thoreau's friend Alcott seems to be even more "affirmative about life." Thoreau said, "His [Alcott's] attitude is one of greater faith and expectation than that of any man I know" (Tauber 26). Like other members of the movement, Margaret Fuller shares the Transcendentalist group's optimism. Echoing Alcott, she says, "Evil is abstraction; Good is accomplishment" (Boller 100). Although at times she is faced with disappointment and frustration, she never gives up her faith in "the divine soul of this visible creation, which cannot error will not sleep, which cannot permit evil to be permanent or its aim of beauty to be eventually frustrated in the smallest particular" (Boller 143). Summing up the transcendentalists' optimistic beliefs and attitudes, Parker writes that "there was more gladness than sadness in the world and that evil was a transient phenomenon in God's creation" (2). Thus, Transcendentalism was the first successful American movement that influenced America's religion, philosophy, literature, and attitude toward life.

7.1.2 Emerson's life and literary career

Ralph Waldo Emerson [May 25, 1803 – April 27, 1882] was an American essayist, lecturer and poet who led the Transcendentalist movement of the mid-nineteenth century. He was seen as a champion of individualism and a present critic of the countervailing pressures of society, and he disseminated his thoughts through dozens of published essays and more than 1,500 public lectures across the United States.

Emerson was born in Boston, Massachusetts in May 25, 1803, son of Ruth Haskins and the Rev. William Emerson, a Unitarian minister. He was named after his mother's brother Ralph and his father's great-grandmother Rebecca Waldo. Ralph Waldo was the second of five sons who survived into adulthood. After his father's death, Emerson was raised by his mother, with the help of the other women in the family. Emerson's formal schooling began at the Boston Latin School in 1812, when he was nine. In October 1817, at fourteen, Emerson went to Harvard College and was appointed freshman messenger for the president, requiring Emerson to fetch delinquent students and send messages to faculty. He entered the Divinity School in 1825 and was licensed for the ministry in 1826. Emerson married Ellen Louisa Tucker, in Concord, New Hampshire in 1827. She died in 1829. Later in September 14, 1835, he married Lydia Jackson. Boston's 'Second Church' invited Emerson to serve as its junior pastor and he was ordained on January 11, 1829. He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1864.

In March 1837, Emerson gave a series of lectures on *The Philosophy of History* at Boston's Masonic Temple and on July 15, 1838 "Divinity School

Address” – school graduation address. In August 31, 1837, he delivered his famous address *The American Scholar* to the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard College at the First Parish in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was invited to speak in recognition of his groundbreaking work *Nature*, published a year earlier, in which he established a new way for America’s fledgling society to regard the world. Sixty years after declaring independence, American culture was still heavily influenced by Europe. Emerson, for the first time in the country’s history, provided a visionary philosophical framework for escaping “from under its iron lids” and building a new, distinctly American cultural identity.

Emerson was a great essayist. His essays are the scriptures of thought. Emerson anonymously published *Nature* in September 9, 1836. The Transcendental group began to publish its flagship journal, *The Dial* in July, 1840. He published *Essays*, his second book in 1841, which included the famous essay “Self-Reliance”. In January 1842, he wrote of his son’s loss in the poem “Threnody” and essay “Experience”. In 1844, Emerson published his second collection of essays entitled, “Essays: Second Series” and in 1856 *English Traits*, based largely on observations recorded in his travel journals and notebooks. His Seventh collection of essays “The Conduct of Life” was published in 1860. In the late 1874, Emerson published an anthology of poetry called *Parnassus*. Emerson’s own journal of sixteen large volumes, in definitive Harvard University Press edition was published between 1960 and 1982.

Emerson started writing poems when he was at the age of eighteen. When he was in senior year, he served as “Class poet – as was custom, he presented an original poem on Harvard’s Class Day, a month before his official graduation on August 29, 1821” (McAleer 61). Later he went to St. Augustine, Florida, where he took long walks on the beach and began writing poetry. Emerson’s poetry emphasizes nature as a symbol of the divine and focuses on the commonplace and everyday experience. Among his influences are the Romantic British poets Wordsworth and Coleridge, the metaphysical poet George Herbert, and the transcendental Persian poets Hafez and Saadi. The most well known of Emerson’s mystical poems influenced by the Persian poets are “The Sphinx,” the opening poem of his first volume which establishes Emerson’s mysterious, prophetic tone; “Hamatreya,” an application of Hindu wisdom to the New England setting; “Bacchus,” a celebration of poetic inspiration; “Days,” a combination of Puritan values and oriental imagery; and “Brahma,” a condensation of Hindu ideas that lead to the association of Nirvana with selflessness. Another of Emerson’s major themes is the Romantic tribute to nature. It is represented in such famous poems as “The Snow Storm,” a poem in blank verse which depicts a fierce winter storm that transforms the New England landscape, “The Rhodora,” a lyrical celebration of the native flower which suggests the presence of a divine force in its creation, along with “The Adirondacs,” a blank verse tribute to the mountains and “The Titmouse,” a poem to the tiny bird that conquers fear. Another thematic grouping contains poems examining personal issues in Emerson’s life, such as “Threnody” about the death of his son, “The Problem” which addresses Emerson’s personal dilemma of admiration for church leaders despite his refusal to

remain within their ranks and "Terminus," an anticipation of his own death. During his life, Emerson was most noted for his patriotic poems such as the classic, public verses "Concord Hymn: Sung at the Completion of the Battle Monument, July 4, 1837" and "Boston Hymn." His edition *Selected Poems* is a compilation of poems from his first two volumes, rearranged with minor changes. Posthumous publications include *Poems* and the recently published *The Poetry Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* which makes easily accessible Emerson's rough drafts and comments regarding the composition of his poetry.

Emerson's religious views are often considered as radical at the time. Harold Bloom in his book, *The American Religion* repeatedly refers Emerson as the prophet of the American Religion. He believed that all things are connected to god and therefore, all things are divine. When asked about his religious belief, he stated, "I am more of a Quaker than anything else. I believe in the 'still, small voice,' and that voice is Christ within us" (Haskins 48).

On April 21, 1882, Emerson was found to be suffering from pneumonia. He died on April 27, 1882. He was buried in 'Sleepy Hollow Cemetery', Concord, Massachusetts.

7.2 EMERSON AND INDIAN THOUGHT

Transcendentalism was the first American intellectual movement that showed true interests in Eastern philosophy. Emerson started to read about Indian philosophy and mythology in *The Edinburgh Review* between 1820 and 1825. His interest in Indian thought grew when he was a young Harvard graduate, and it continued until the end of his writing career. We see its evidence in many of his essays, poems, letters, and journal entries. For example, the concept of Brahma plays a central role in his works and ideas. He is also very much interested in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Some of his essays such as "Self-Reliance" deal with a theme that is very much similar to the concept of *karma*.

7.2.1 *The Bhagavad Gita*

Emerson was particularly struck by the teachings of *Bhagavad Gita*, "the first of books," as he once called it (Buell 178). He wrote about the *Gita* that "In England the Understanding rules and materialistic truth, the becoming, the fit, the discreet, the brave, the advantageous. But they could not produce such a book as the *Bhagavad Gita*" (Journals X, 503). The *Gita* is an ancient Sanskrit text comprising of verses embellished with many literary devices such as allegory, metaphor, and allusion. It is a record of conversations between Bhagavan or God, in the form of Krishna, and Arjuna, a human. Arjuna is a Kshatriya warrior of the Pandava family and Krishna is his cousin and the driver of his chariot. In the battle field, Arjuna sees many of his relatives in the opposing force and, being overcome by pity, he refuses to fight. At this juncture, Krishna tries to make him realize the importance of action. He also reminds him of his obligation to follow his *dharma* or duty and to ignore his personal feelings. Krishna sends this message to the mankind through Arjuna, as does Christ through his twelve disciples. Krishna says: "Though unborn, for the Atman [soul] is eternal, though Lord of all beings, yet using my own nature, I come into existence using my own

maya.” Krishna sends himself through human beings to save people from *adharma*, ruin of morality and justice. He says, “For whenever there is a decaying of *dharma*, and a rising up of *adharma*, then I send Myself forth” (Herman 146). This idea resonates with Emerson’s emphasis on intuition and conscience. In the essay “Over-Soul,” he writes that we, as individual souls, are part of the Greater or Over-Soul. We do not have to go to church to be united with the Over-Soul because our intuition can illuminate our spiritual world like the flashes of light. Here, Emerson seems to be influenced by the teachings of the *Upanishad* and the *Gita* that nirguna [higher] Brahman, or what Emerson calls the Over-Soul, is manifested through human beings. Thus, Emerson’s essays and journals indicate that the *Bhagavad Gita* was a great source of knowledge and inspiration for him.

7.2.2 *The Laws of Karma*

Another Indian philosophical concept that had tremendous influence on Emerson is *karma*. In Sanskrit, *karma* means action or work. In the *Upanishadic* and *Vedic* traditions, *karma* signifies “the results or consequences of action” and, more distinctively, “the unwanted, to-be avoided-at-all-costs results or fruits of action.” The results of disobedience bring future suffering and pain. The *Vedas*, the *Upanisads*, and the *Bhagavad Gita* all mention that disobeyers must face grave consequences. The law of *karma*, in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad IV.4.6*, mentions that “This is what happens to the man who desires. To whatever his mind is attached, the self becomes that in the next life. Achieving that end, it returns again to this world” (qtd. in Herman 131). Thus, the law of *karma* is a device to link up actions and their consequences of this life and of the next. The *Svetasvatara Upanishad* states two important doctrines about *karma*: (1) “According to its actions, the embodied self chooses repeatedly various forms in various conditions in the next life,” and (2) “according to its own qualities and acts, the embodied self chooses the kinds of forms, large and small, that it will take on” (qtd. in Herman 131). Therefore, it is the self that chooses the form it wants to be.

What is remarkable here is to note that every self gets what it wants and what it deserves. Moreover, the law of *karma* works automatically because there is no god, according to the abovementioned laws, who can give each self rewards or punishments. Franklin Edgerton comments on this automatic *karmic* law: “It is man’s relation to propriety or morality, *dharma*, which alone determines. For more than two thousand years, it appears that almost all Hindus have regarded transmigration, determined by “*karma*,” as an axiomatic fact. ‘By good deed one becomes what is good; by evil deed, evil’” (qtd. in Herman 132). In this sense, it seems to be clear that the *karmic* laws work according to the deeds or actions of individuals, not by the choice of any gods.

In line with this conception of the *karmic* laws, Emerson emphasizes the good deeds of people. In “Self-Reliance,” he urges his readers not to depend on good luck. He also believes that we should not take any piece of good fortune as a good omen. He concludes: “A political victory, a rise of rents, the recovery of your sick or the return of your absent friend, or some other favourable event raises your spirits, and you think good days are preparing

for you. Do not believe it. Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles" (164). Here, Emerson's notion of self-reliance is very close to the *karmic* laws. We can choose whatever we want to be; everything is determined by our action or *karma*. We have freedom of choice and we can achieve the godly qualities that we already have within ourselves; or, we can choose to be devilish by our own *karma*.

7.2.3 The Concept of Maya

The idea of Maya is probably most important for understanding the concept of Brahma, and its influence on Emerson. In its simplest form, Maya means a magical power in which the Creator reveals Himself and the mystery of His creation. A. L. Herman describes Maya as:

The means by which *nirguna*, or higher Brahman is enabled to manifest Itself as *saguna*, or lower Brahman, is called maya . . . The *Upanisads* answer this all-important cosmological question about origins by indicating simply that the power or maya of God made all this. While all creation comes forth from the Unmanifest and Imperishable, it is the Great Lord or *Ishvara* who does the actual creating, and does it with this maya. (108)

The concept of Maya always fascinated Emerson. In his poem "Maia", Emerson dwells on the power of Maya and how it deceives us. In addition to this poem, he talks about Maya several times in his journals. For example, he responds to the idea of Maya in the following entry: "The illusion that strikes me [most] as the masterpiece of Maya, is, the timidity with which we assert our moral sentiment. We are made of it, the world is built by it, Things endure as they share it, all beauty, all health, all intelligence exist by it; yet 'tis the last thing we dare utter, we shrink to speak it, or to range ourselves on its side" (Journals XV 243). He fully agrees with the concept of Maya and believes that the whole world is made of it. He quotes from the *Veda*, a sacred text of the Aryans that "the world is born of Maya" (Journals XVI 33).

In addition to Emerson's journals, we see the presence of Maya in many of his essays. For example, in "Illusions," he claims that we dwell in a kingdom of illusions. With an analogy of sick men in hospital, Emerson describes the condition of human life: "We change only from bed to bed, from one folly to another; it cannot signify much what becomes of such castaways, wailing, stupid, comatose creatures, lifted from bed to bed, from the nothing of life to the nothing of death" (384). In his essay "Experience," Emerson writes that we cannot be sure about what we see and perceive of. We see things through filter glass—optical illusions—and we cannot know if what we see is real. If our life is a dream, there is no end to this dream. Another problem of our experience is our subjectiveness, as we are always trapped in it. The meaning and nature of everything depend on the eyes that see it. Realizing the endlessness of illusion, Emerson concludes that "Nature does not like to be observed, and likes that we should be her fools and playmates" (269). He understands how difficult it is to penetrate this illusion as Lord Krishna in the *Upanishads* says, "This divine maya of Mine, made of the *gunas*, is difficult to penetrate. But those who take refuge in Me alone, they penetrate

this illusion” (qtd. in Herman 191). This perplexity pushes Emerson toward the following conclusion:

Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them they prove to be many coloured lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus. From the mountain you see the mountain. We animate what we can, and we see only what we animate. (269)

Thus, Emerson’s writings illustrate that he was heavily influenced by the concept of Maya and much of Emerson’s thought and writing corresponds with Indian philosophy and mythology.

7.3 RALPH WALDO EMERSON’S *BRAHMA*

7.3.1 Brahma: Poem

If the red slayer thinks he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.

They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I am the hymn the Brahman sings.

The strong gods pine for my abode,
And pine in vain the sacred seven;
But thou, meek lover of the good!
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven.

7.3.2 Theme of the Poem

“Brahma” is a lyric poem in which the author assumes the persona of the Hindu god Brahma. Emerson completed the poem in 1856, and the *Atlantic Monthly* published it in 1857. A notable metaphysical poem of Emerson, “Brahma” envisages a supreme power that governs and guides the whole universe. This supreme power is the origin and creator of all beings, and also the final destination of all creatures. Through a ceaseless cycle of births and deaths, through nobility of needs and purity of heart; through purgation of baser passions and burning of all ‘Karmas’, the soul finally merges with Brahma. This is the highest stage of spiritual development. This is the stage of liberation or salvation which is sought after by all the saints and sages, yogis and devotees, and even by gods. Every individual soul of man is a spark of the Over-Soul or Brahma, and the highest spiritual advancement of the soul lies in its merging into its parent the Over-Soul or Brahma. This

is the central thought around which this famous poem of Emerson has been developed.

7.3.3 Source: Its Indian Origin

Emerson based "Brahma" on ideas he read in the literature of Hinduism, including the *Upanishads*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*, a poem centring on ethics, the immortality of the soul, and other subjects. Hinduism is a major world religion that developed in India more than three thousand years ago. It encompasses many values and beliefs. Hindus believe that Brahma, the god of creation encompasses the essence of the universe. This essence consists of the nature of everything that exists – every human, animal, tree, cloud, grain of sand, emotion and idea.

Brahma: the god of creation

Brahman: the essence, or "soul", of the universe

Brahmin: name of the caste (social class) to which Hindu priests belong

The title of Emerson's poem refers to both the god of creation [Brahma] and the universal essence [Brahman] that he encompasses. Greatly influenced by a sacred text of Hinduism, *Katha-upanishad*, "Brahma" is a philosophical explication of the universal spirit by that name. The poetic form of elegiac quatrain is used to represent the solemn nature of the subject. Throughout the poem, Brahma appears as the only speaker, sustaining the continuity of the work. That the spirit is the only speaker signifies not only its absolute nature but also its sustaining power, upon which the existence of the universe—metaphorically, the poem—is based.

The poem *Brahma* has its origin in Indian metaphysics and transcendental philosophy which had so powerfully influenced Emerson. The chief source of this poem was provided by Indian scriptures, notably *Gita*. Three concepts crucial to understanding Brahman are: *para* and *apara* Brahma, *Atman*, and *maya*. There are two forms of Brahm: *para* and *apara* Brahman, one is the formed and the other formless. In the *Upanisads*, the formed is described as unreal and the formless as real. The *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanisad* states that "Truly, there are two aspects of Brahman, the formed and the formless, the mortal and the immortal, the unmoving and moving, the existent and that which is beyond existence" (qtd. in Herman 107). The immortal Brahma enters into the mortal Brahma. When this happens, a human—a mortal Brahma—becomes united with the immortal. In this way, humans can be united with the "formless" Brahma, which can be difficult even for the strong gods. This idea resonates with Emerson's belief that man can achieve the majesty of God by good deed and justice.

Another metaphysical concept of Brahma is *Atman*, which is synonymous with the Supreme Self or Spirit. It is similar to the Christian notion of Light, Christ, or Spirit, as seen in St. Paul's words, *Galatians 2:20*, "[I]t is not I who live but Christ that liveth in me" (qtd. in Herman 110). *Atman* is the impersonal God, godlikeness, or the power of creation in the universe, which is found in all beings. The *Upanisads* mentions that "It is by seeing, hearing, reflecting, and concentrating on one's essential self [*atman*] that the whole world is known," and that "The *atman* is below, above, to the west, east, south, and north; the atman is, indeed, the whole world" (qtd.

in Hamilton 30). We see this conception of *atman* in Emerson's "Divinity School Address," in which he says that: Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul...He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, "I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or, see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think." (134)

The concept of Maya is also related to that of *atman*, where all beings of the world are seen as parts of the Supreme Being. Brahma is "the underlying reality; it can best be understood in contrast with Maya, the changing, illusory world of appearance" (Dwivedi 172). Maya has a double meaning because it is simultaneously a product of power of creativity and the power itself. The *Svetasvatara Upanishad* says, "Know that nature (*prakriti*) is maya and that the user of maya is great Ishvara. And the whole world is filled with beings that are part of him" (qtd. in Herman 109).

However, the concepts of Maya are not always clear-cut. Maya, as it literally means magic, has puzzled many scholars. As seen in the poem "Brahma," Brahma is "the doubter and the doubt." For this, it may seem to be a fruitless endeavour to understand the divine Maya. The way Maya works seems to be contradictory at times because we have to unite ourselves with Maya, and at the same time, we have to remain distinct from it. As Emerson mentions, "Adore, in order to escape from existence, him who can annihilate it, and whose feet are adorable; he who unites himself, whilst remains distinct from it, to Maya, which is his energy endowed with qualities" (Journals XVI 32). Hence, Emerson is simultaneously inspired and perplexed by the concept of Maya.

Throughout the poem "Brahma", Emerson alludes to Hindu mythology, the knowledge which he gained through reading *Bhagavad Gita* and other Hindu scriptures. Emerson succeeds in using clever, yet complex paradoxical logic in order to present his philosophy in poetic terms. Brahma is the supreme spirit or divine reality in the universe, the eternal spirit from which all has come and to which all shall return. Brahman, the supreme soul of the universe, is uncreated, illimitable and timeless. It is Absolute Being. The poem contrasts the relativity of human and temporal perception with the sublime harmony of the Spiritual Absolute. The former is an appearance alone while the latter is not other than the individual soul in an ultimate sense.

7.3.4 Paraphrase

Lines 1-4. If the bloody murderer thinks he murders his foe, he is wrong, and if the murdered one thinks he has been murdered, he is equally wrong. They do not know the subtle and mysterious ways of Brahma, the Absolute. It is he who lives, he who dies, and he who is born again.

Lines 5-8. To Brahma all contraries and contradictions are the same. To him far and forgotten are near; to him shadow and sunlight are the same. To him the vanished and departed ones appear as present, and to him fame and shame are the same. The opposed pairs have no ultimate validity. Brahma is beyond the contradictions and contraries.

Lines 9-12. They are wrong who believe they can ignore Brahma or escape from him. When they fly, even the wings that carry them are propelled by him. Brahma is the doubter as well as the doubt himself. Brahma is also the hymn the Brahmin sings.

Lines 13-16. Even the strong gods crave to go to the abode (Heaven) of the Brahma and the seven holiest saints of the Hindus also seek to attain Heaven. But, a humble lover of good should seek to find Brahma himself and turn his back on heaven.

7.3.5 Detailed Analysis

1. If the red slayer turn again. (Lines 1-4)

This is the first stanza of Emerson's famous poem *Brahma*. It contains the very essence of Emerson's transcendental philosophy derived from Indian metaphysics and philosophy. Brahma or the Supreme Being is the beginning and end of all things. Everything originates from him, and finally goes back into him. He is the creator as well as destroyer; the destroyer of everything. He is the means as well as the end. He is the actor as well as the act. He is player as well as the play. When one is born, he is born; when one dies, he dies; though birth and death are both illusions. He is immortal, eternal, omnipresent and omnipotent. He is without beginning and without end. He is everything, and everything is he.

So, the poet says that man and his actions are mere illusions. It is Brahman who acts in the guise of man. The individual soul is Brahma himself in the ultimate sense. In this sense, the soul has no beginning, no middle and no end. It does not originate nor can it be destroyed. The slayer, the slain and the act of slaying are all one and the same. It is Brahma who plays all the three roles. If the slayer thinks that he is slaying, or if the slain thinks that he has been slain, both are wrong. Neither the slayer nor the slain is real. They are both the images of Brahma. The soul cannot be killed. The soul by itself is not active, and therefore it cannot kill. The slayer and the slain are both ignorant of the ways of Brahma. It is Brahma, in the guise of soul, who is born, lives in the body of man, passes away and then returns with the new birth after death. This cycle of the soul goes on until the soul merges into the Over-soul or Brahma.

2. They reckon ill Brahmin sings. (Lines 9-12)

Men are ignorant about the mysterious ways of Brahma. He is the guardian of all, guide and companion who cannot be ignored or put off. Even if man tries to flee from him, he cannot do so without his help and permission. If he runs, he runs with the feet of Brahma; if he flies, he flies with the wings of Brahma. If man doubts, he does so with his express will. Brahma himself is doubter as well as the doubt. He is the faith of the faithful; scepticism of the sceptic. The Brahmin sings songs of his glory. He is the prayer of the devotee; the hymn of the Brahmin. He is everything and everybody; and everything and everybody is in him. Nothing exists outside him, and nothing can happen without his sanction.

3. The strong gods on heaven. (Lines 13-16)

Brahma is the ultimate reality. He is the final destination, the end of everything. His bosom is the shelter and resting place of all souls. All souls are travelling through the space, through the human world or above it, and they are all proceeding towards his abode, to find shelter and permanent harbour in his bosom. Soul attains the highest spiritual development when it merges itself with the Over-Soul of Brahma. This is the highest aspiration of every soul. The highest of gods seek the abode of Brahma. Even the holy Seven Stars are pursuing his abode. The noble man whose thoughts are pure and whose deeds are good and noble can easily find his way into the bosom of Brahma. Even heaven is no substitute for Brahma's bosom. Brahma advises us to turn our back even on heaven and seek shelter in him. When the soul merges itself with Brahma, there is no rebirth. This brings complete liberation from the painful cycle of births and deaths.

7.3.6 Critical Appreciation

Brahma is an excellent reflection and representation of Ralph Waldo Emerson's work as a whole. Emerson's poem is a transcendentalist exploration into the nature of life and death and the powers of the divine. In appropriating the Hindu god Brahma, Emerson seeks to develop a metaphor to explain the notion of transcendentalist thought. The opening stanza helps to redefine the notion of traditionalist life and death, with the sense of continuity and complexity within such notions. In this stanza, Emerson is insisting that there is a sense of emotional understanding about the nature of 'slain' and that which 'slays'. Emphasizing the duality in both, the poem continues to the second stanza, which again suggests that dualistic opposition is actually in tandem with one another. "Shadow and sunlight" (6) are no longer in diametric competition, just as is "vanished gods" (7) who might 'appear'. The opposing polarities of "shame" and "fame" are cast in a similar light of symmetry. The implication of this stanza is that there is some type of energy that brings together that which is oppositional and traditionalist notions of demonising one force over another might not be in line with this energy. Here is probably where Emerson's Transcendentalist thought, a movement that sought to bring emotions into reconfiguring what had been stressed as normative and socially acceptable, is most evident. The fact that the last line integrates socially deemed values of "shame" and "fame" is evidence of this. This theme is continued in the concluding stanzas. The last two lines provide Emerson's own twist to the notion of divinity, when he suggests that one need not look to heaven for such a cosmic and energetic force. The implication would be that this belief resides in the individual who can find and locate this spirit of unity and symmetry in their own sense of identity and self.

7.4 THE STRUCTURE OF THE POEM

7.4.1 Language and technique

"Brahma" is a short poem of sixteen lines, divided into four quatrains. The language and diction used in the poem are simple, straightforward

and clear. But behind this linguistic simplicity, there is a deep subtlety and depth of thought. The power of the poem lies in its conveying the deepest metaphysical and transcendental thought in the simplest and clearest possible language and style.

Meter- Each line contains eight syllables. The dominant meter is iambic tetrameter, in which a line consists of four pairs of syllable – the first syllable in each pair unstressed and the second stressed. The last two lines of the first stanza demonstrate the pattern:

.....1.....2.....3.....4

They **KNOW**..|.not **WELL**..|.the **SUB**..|.tle **WAYS**

.....1.....2.....3.....4

I **KEEP**,..|.and **PASS**,..|.and **TURN**..|.a **GAIN**.

Lines 1, 5, and 6 appear to break from this pattern by placing stress on the first syllable of the line.

Rhyme

In each stanza, the first line rhymes with the third, and the second rhymes with the fourth.

Rhyme scheme abab

Point of View – Assuming the role of Brahma, Emerson presents the first fourteen lines of the poem in the first-person point of view. In the last two lines, he addresses the reader, using second-person point of view.

7.4.2 Figures of Speech

Following are examples of figures of speech in the poem.

Alliteration

If the red slayer **thinks** he slays, / Or if the slain **thinks** he is slain (lines 1 and 2)

Far or forgot to me is near (line 5)

Shadow and sunlight are the same (line 6)

When me they fly, I am the wings (line 10)

I am the doubter and the doubt (line 11)

And pine in vain the sacred Seven (line 14)

Metaphor

When me they fly, I am the wings (10) *Comparison of Brahma to a bird*

I am the doubter and the doubt (line 11) *Comparison of Brahma to a doubter and to doubt itself*

And I the hymn the Brahmin sings (line 12) *Comparison of Brahma to a hymn*

Paradox

Far or forgot to me is near (line 5)

Shadow and sunlight are the same (line 6)

And one to me are shame and fame (line 8)

7.5 LET US SUM UP

The Indian concept of Brahma had great influence on Emerson. Brahma is the god of creation, and one of the Hindu trinity—others being Vishnu, the preserver and saviour of the world, and Siva, the destroyer or dissolver of the world. In this poem “Brahma,” Emerson describes the mystery of Brahma. It is almost impossible for humans to understand the “subtle ways” of Brahma because his character is beyond human comprehension. However, at the end of the poem, we see the light of hope because humans can find him although “strong gods” look for him “in vain.” This is the human supremacy, and as Brahma assures, anybody who is the “meek lover of the good” can find him.

Thus, the Indian philosophical and religious concepts and teachings had a great influence on Emerson’s intellectual works. By exploring and utilizing Indian spiritual beliefs and philosophical traditions, Emerson paved the way for his successors who continued to dig into the richness of ancient texts such as the *Upanishads* and the *Gita*. Therefore, with regard to Emerson’s contribution to American scholars’ growing interest in Indian thought, Dale Riepe is convincingly right when he says that “there has been a continuous concern for Indian thought in the United States since Emerson’s early years” (125).

7.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. When was Emerson born and who were his parents?

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2. Write short note on Emerson’s education.

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3. List out Emerson’s lectures

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4. Mention the names of Emerson’s essays.

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5. What do you know about Emerson's own journal?

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6. When did Emerson die?

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7. Where was Emerson buried?

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8. Write about the Source of *Brahma*.

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9. Define: Brahman & Brahmin.

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10. What does the title refer to?

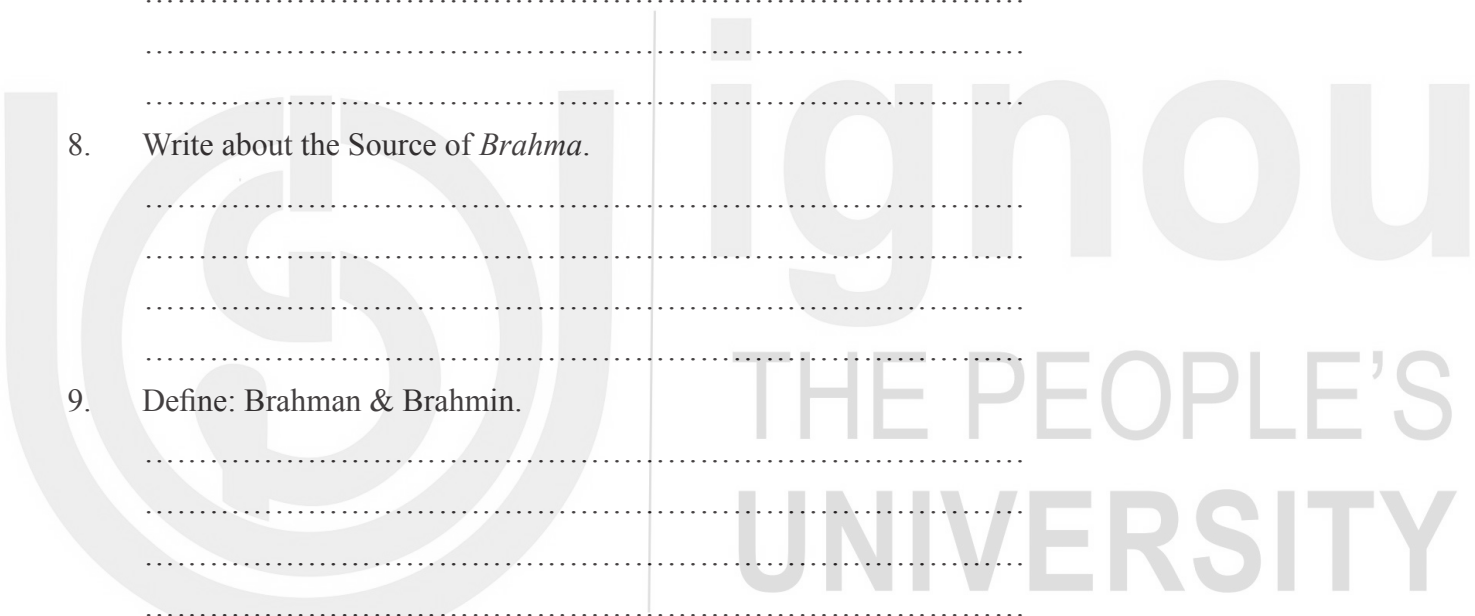
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11. Write about Hinduism.

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12. Who is the speaker and what does he speak?

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13. What is *Brahma*?

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14. What does the opening stanza define?

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15. What is the implication of the first stanza?

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16. What is same for Brahma?

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17. Who is Brahma?

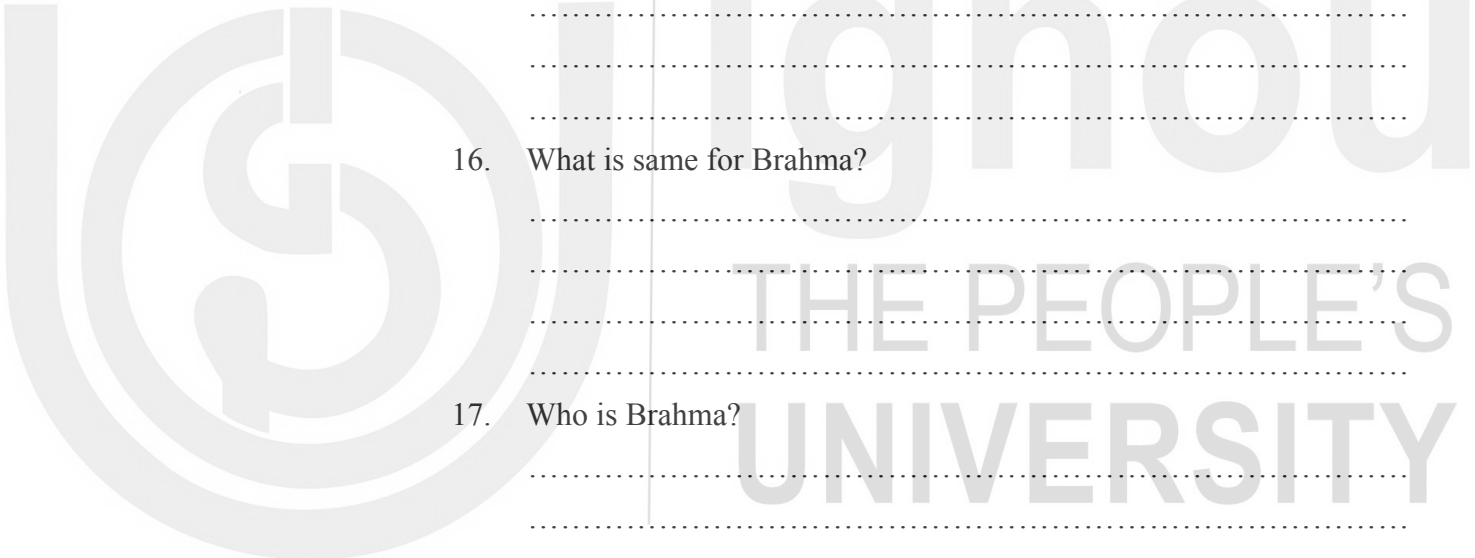
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18. What does Emerson advocate man to seek?

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19. What does *Brahma* envisage?

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20. How does the soul merge Brahma?

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21. Which is the highest stage of spiritual development?

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22. Which is the chief source of the poem?

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23. Write a note on soul.

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24. Why is the soul or Brahman beyond time and space?

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25. Why is Brahman, the very basis of all life?

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26. Write about the language used in the poem.

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27. What is the meter followed in the poem?

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28. List out the figures of speech.

29. Emerson's poems reflect the transcendental philosophy- Discuss.

30. Attempt a critical appreciation of Emerson's *Brahma*.

31. Trace the origin and source of Brahma.

32. How does Emerson emphasize the importance of seeking refuge in god?

33. Write an essay on the language and style of Emerson's *Brahma*.

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