
The Dreamcatcher Trilogy · Volume One

G u i d e b o o k f o r
The
Transparent
Eyeball

S H A R O N K A Y E

with contributions from Jennifer Ault

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INTRODUCTION

This guidebook investigates the philosophical themes that occur in the novel *The Transparent Eyeball*. The story is about a teenager named TJ O'Shay who travels back to the middle of the nineteenth century through a series of unusually vivid dreams. There he learns about the movement in American philosophy known as Transcendentalism. This philosophy transforms TJ, just as it might transform you.

Like many teens, TJ is inexplicably unhappy. No one seems to understand him; people simply want him to conform to ordinary societal rules and norms. But TJ rebels against that expectation, and he decides to do something to express his rebellion. Whatever he does, it needs to be something big—and even a little bit dangerous.

TJ's plan starts coming together when he finds an abandoned cabin in the woods where he can build a set of old-fashioned bombs to blow up an old boathouse on the neighborhood pond. But is the cabin really abandoned? Some notes in the desk drawer about an old painting on the wall convince him that someone else is using the cabin. He resolves never to come back.

But it's too late. TJ can't stop dreaming about the painting. His dreams take him from his modern life in Red River, Louisiana, to Concord, Massachusetts, in the 1840s. He soon meets the men in the painting, and he meets a girl named Louisa May Alcott, who wants him to help her figure out what the men are up to.

There's something terrifying out there in the woods—something that connects TJ's Deep South cabin to another cabin built by a philosopher named Henry David Thoreau on the shore of Walden Pond. Thoreau is big trouble—there's no doubt about that. But for evil or for good?

As TJ and Louisa May struggle to solve the mystery at Walden Pond, they meet the Transcendentalists, who teach them that the world contains both nature and society and that human beings find happiness in the latter only when they stay firmly grounded in the former. This insight funnels TJ's destructive imagination into a more pressing cause that changes his outlook on the world forever.

While the novel can be enjoyed and learned from on its own, this guidebook provides a deeper understanding of the history of Transcendentalism. It contains thirteen chapters, each focused on three successive chapters of the novel. Each guidebook chapter has three components:

1. A summary of the plot developments for those three chapters of the novel
2. A primary reading relevant to the storyline
3. Discussion questions concerning both the reading and the novel

These components will provide a rich backdrop for thinking about the deeper dimensions of the story as it unfolds and will offer a multifaceted look at the Transcendentalist Movement.

A Note about the Readings: The readings in this book are the authors' original words or widely accepted translations of those words. Some of them are challenging to read. Students may need to read passages more than once to understand the points that these philosophers are making. Readings that are too challenging can be skipped; however, the discussion questions at the end of each chapter will allow even students who do not read the selection to engage in thoughtful debates, prompting them to think about points that they may not otherwise have considered. Note, too, that the majority of the questions concern the events in the novel. As such, even if a student does not complete the guidebook reading or does not fully understand the guidebook reading, he or she can still take an active part in the discussions.

I. THE TRANSPARENT EYEBALL

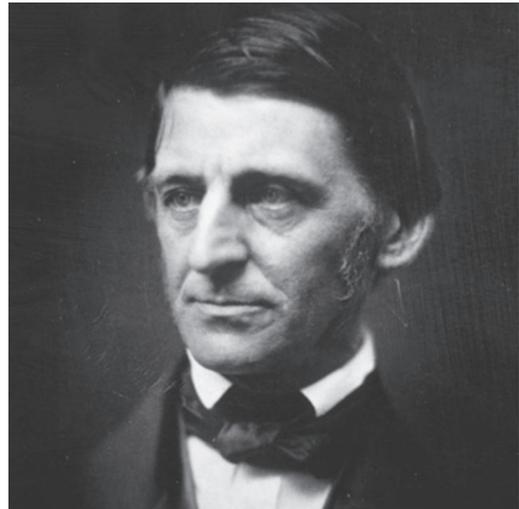
CHAPTERS 1-3

Plot Summary

TJ is a teenage boy living in Red River, Louisiana. At odds with his family and schoolmates, and recently suspended from school for shoving his neighbor Ivy, he seeks solitude in an abandoned cabin in the woods. There he builds a series of bombs to carry out his secret plan to blow up Mr. Smith's boathouse on the neighborhood pond in an act of rebellion. But is the cabin really abandoned? On its wall is a poster of a painting depicting a group of philosophers on a camping trip, and in a desk drawer is a freshly written note asking, "Who are these men, and what are they looking at?"

RALPH WALDO EMERSON, "THE TRANSCENDENTALIST," 1849

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was the lead figure in the American Transcendentalist Movement. Trained as a Unitarian minister, he left the church because of philosophical objections to some of its doctrines. Instead of preaching, he turned to giving speeches on popular philosophical topics all around the country. In his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts, he gathered philosophers around him to promote individualism, the appreciation of nature, and the belief that God is in everything. Critics started calling these philosophers "Transcendentalists" in an effort to make them sound absurdly unrealistic, but the philosophers embraced the name. In the passage that follows, Emerson argues that Transcendentalism is a new kind of idealism.



The first thing we have to say respecting what are called new views here in New England, at the present time, is, that they are not new, but the very oldest of thoughts cast into the mould of these new times. The light is always identical in its composition, but it falls on a great variety of objects, and by so falling is first revealed to us, not in its own form, for it is formless, but in theirs; in like manner, thought only appears in the objects it classifies. What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842. As thinkers, mankind

have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness; the first class beginning to think from the data of the senses, the second class perceive that the senses are not final, and say, the senses give us representations of things, but what are the things themselves, they cannot tell. The materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstances, and the animal wants of man; the idealist on the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture. These two modes of thinking are both natural, but the idealist contends that his way of thinking is in higher nature. He concedes all that the other affirms, admits the impressions of sense, admits their coherency, their use and beauty, and then asks the materialist for his grounds of assurance that things are as his senses represent them. But I, he says, affirm facts not affected by the illusions of sense, facts which are of the same nature as the faculty which reports them, and not liable to doubt; facts which in their first appearance to us assume a native superiority to material facts, degrading these into a language by which the first are to be spoken; facts which it only needs a retirement from the senses to discern. Every materialist will be an idealist; but an idealist can never go backward to be a materialist.

The idealist, in speaking of events, sees them as spirits. He does not deny the sensuous fact: by no means; but he will not see that alone. He does not deny the presence of this table, this chair, and the walls of this room, but he looks at these things as the reverse side of the tapestry, as the other end, each being a sequel or completion of a spiritual fact which nearly concerns him. This manner of looking at things, transfers every object in nature from an independent and anomalous position without there, into the consciousness. Even the materialist Condillac, perhaps the most logical expounder of materialism, was constrained to say, "Though we should soar into the heavens, though we should sink into the abyss, we never go out of ourselves; it is always our own thought that we perceive." What more could an idealist say?

The materialist, secure in the certainty of sensation, mocks at fine-spun theories, at star-gazers and dreamers, and believes that his life is solid, that he at least takes nothing for granted, but knows where he stands, and what he does. Yet how easy it is to show him, that he also is a phantom walking and working amid phantoms, and that he need only ask a question or two beyond his daily questions, to find his solid universe growing dim and impalpable before his sense. The sturdy capitalist, no matter how deep and square on blocks of Quincy granite he lays the foundations of his banking-house or Exchange, must set it, at last, not on a cube corresponding to the angles of his structure, but on a mass of unknown materials and solidity, red-hot or white-hot, perhaps at the core, which rounds off to an almost perfect sphericity, and lies floating in soft air, and goes spinning away, dragging bank and banker with it at a rate of thousands of miles the hour, he knows not whither,—a bit of bullet, now glimmering, now darkling through a small cubic space on the edge of an unimaginable pit of emptiness. And this wild balloon, in which his whole venture is embarked, is a just symbol of his whole state and faculty. One thing, at least, he says is certain,

and does not give me the headache, that figures do not lie; the multiplication table has been hitherto found unimpeachable truth; and, moreover, if I put a gold eagle in my safe, I find it again tomorrow;—but for these thoughts, I know not whence they are. They change and pass away. But ask him why he believes that an uniform experience will continue uniform, or on what grounds he founds his faith in his figures, and he will perceive that his mental fabric is built up on just as strange and quaking foundations as his proud edifice of stone.

In the order of thought, the materialist takes his departure from the external world, and esteems a man as one product of that. The idealist takes his departure from his consciousness, and reckons the world an appearance. The materialist respects sensible masses, Society, Government, social art, and luxury, every establishment, every mass, whether majority of numbers, or extent of space, or amount of objects, every social action. The idealist has another measure, which is metaphysical, namely, the rank which things themselves take in his consciousness; not at all, the size or appearance. Mind is the only reality, of which men and all other natures are better or worse reflectors. Nature, literature, history, are only subjective phenomena. Although in his action overpowered by the laws of action, and so, warmly cooperating with men, even preferring them to himself, yet when he speaks scientifically, or after the order of thought, he is constrained to degrade persons into representatives of truths. He does not respect labor, or the products of labor, namely, property, otherwise than as a manifold symbol, illustrating with wonderful fidelity of details the laws of being; he does not respect government, except as far as it reiterates the law of his mind; nor the church; nor charities; nor arts, for themselves; but hears, as at a vast distance, what they say, as if his consciousness would speak to him through a pantomimic scene. His thought,—that is the Universe. His experience inclines him to behold the procession of facts you call the world, as flowing perpetually outward from an invisible, unsounded centre in himself, centre alike of him and of them, and necessitating him to regard all things as having a subjective or relative existence, relative to that aforesaid Unknown Centre of him.

From this transfer of the world into the consciousness, this beholding of all things in the mind, follow easily his whole ethics. It is simpler to be self-dependent. The height, the deity of man is, to be self-sustained, to need no gift, no foreign force. Society is good when it does not violate me; but best when it is likeliest to solitude. Everything real is self-existent. Everything divine shares the self-existence of Deity. All that you call the world is the shadow of that substance which you are, the perpetual creation of the powers of thought, of those that are dependent and of those that are independent of your will. Do not cumber yourself with fruitless pains to mend and remedy remote effects; let the soul be erect, and all things will go well. You think me the child of my circumstances: I make my circumstance. Let any thought or motive of mine be different from that they are, the difference will transform my condition and economy. I—this thought which is called I,—is the mould into which the world is poured like melted wax. The mould is invisible, but the world betrays the shape of the mould. You call it the power of circumstance, but it is the

power of me. Am I in harmony with myself? my position will seem to you just and commanding. Am I vicious and insane? my fortunes will seem to you obscure and descending. As I am, so shall I associate, and, so shall I act; Caesar's history will paint out Caesar. Jesus acted so, because he thought so. I do not wish to overlook or to gainsay any reality; I say, I make my circumstance: but if you ask me, Whence am I? I feel like other men my relation to that Fact which cannot be spoken, or defined, nor even thought, but which exists, and will exist.

The Transcendentalist adopts the whole connection of spiritual doctrine. He believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy. He wishes that the spiritual principle should be suffered to demonstrate itself to the end, in all possible applications to the state of man, without the admission of anything unspiritual; that is, anything positive, dogmatic, personal. Thus, the spiritual measure of inspiration is the depth of the thought, and never, who said it? And so he resists all attempts to palm other rules and measures on the spirit than its own.

From www.people.virginia.edu/~sfr/enam3150/transcendentalist.html

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. According to Emerson, "Society is good when it does not violate me; but best when it is likeliest to solitude." Is Emerson missing the entire point of society and of people living in social structures instead of in isolation, or has he put his finger on the source of the problems inherent in even the most advanced civilizations? Is society good for people or a necessary evil? Explain your view.
2. Emerson writes, "You think me the child of my circumstances: I make my circumstance." He goes on to explain that his thoughts determine how he acts and therefore how others see him and react to him. Thus, his thoughts are what determine his circumstances in life. This seems to put the full load of responsibility on an individual to make his or her life what he or she wants it to be. Do you agree with that concept? Can your thoughts make your life better or worse? Or is your life just destined to be one way or another, and your thoughts are what determine whether you think it's a good life or a bad one? Alternatively, is what happens to you so much outside of your control that it's unfair to claim that you alone are responsible for your life?
3. In the novel, TJ feels that he is out of step with everyone else in his life. According to Emerson's beliefs, however, TJ could change his circumstances by changing his thoughts. Do you agree? Could TJ be happier if he changed his thinking? Or would that just be TJ settling for what everyone wants him to be instead of letting him determine on his own who he is?

4. TJ decides to build a set of bombs to blow up the old boathouse on his neighborhood lake. He claims not to want to hurt anyone, just to scare them. According to him, that would make them realize that not everyone fits into their idea of how people should act. Do you agree with him—not that he should build bombs but that people sometimes need a wake-up call that the world is not what they think it is? Would blowing up a building provide that wake-up call? Even if it did, would it convey the message that TJ wants to send?
5. TJ finds a cabin in the woods and a poster of a painting in the cabin. He spends a good deal of time studying the painting, trying to figure out what is happening in the scene depicted in it. Do you think that a work of art is better or worse (or neither) if you have to make an effort to understand what is happening in it? Explain why you think so.
6. Ivy tells TJ that she's not the one who told on him and got him suspended for shoving her. The implication is that she would not have told anyone in a position of authority because, as she remarks, she fights her own battles. Do you agree with Ivy that telling an authority figure about TJ shoving her was the wrong thing for someone to do? Should it have been up to Ivy to make that decision, since she was the one who got shoved? Would it make a difference if TJ had punched her? Would it make a difference if TJ had only threatened to hurt her? Does it matter what Ivy was doing that provoked a reaction from TJ?