

American Transcendentalism

Transcend: [verb] to go beyond the limits of; exceed; be above and independent of the physical universe

Transcendentalism:

- ❖ Proposes a belief in a higher reality than that found in sense experience or in a higher kind of knowledge than that achieved by human reason.
- ❖ Suggests that every individual is capable of discovering this higher truth on his or her own, through intuition

Deism

- ❖ Transcendentalism was strongly influenced by Deism.
- ❖ Deists hold that a certain kind of religious knowledge is either inherent in each person or accessible through the exercise of reason.
- ❖ Transcendentalism also involved a rejection of strict Puritan religious attitudes
- ❖ Unlike the Puritans, the Transcendentalists saw humans and nature as possessing an innate goodness.

Born Bad or Good?

- ❖ Puritans say humans are born sinful
- ❖ Enlightenment thinkers say humans are, at birth, a blank Slate
- ❖ Transcendentalists say that humans are inherently good

The Influence of Romanticism includes:

The celebration of: individualism, the beauty of nature and the virtue of humankind

Transcendental Beliefs:

- ❖ Intuition, not reason, is the highest human faculty
- ❖ A rejection of materialism
- ❖ Simplicity is the path to spiritual greatness
- ❖ Nature is a source of truth & inspiration
- ❖ Non-conformity, individuality & self-reliance

The Transcendentalists:

Ralph Waldo Emerson
Margaret Fuller
Henry David Thoreau
Bronson Alcott

- ❖ American Transcendentalism began with the formation in 1836 of the Transcendental Club in Boston
- ❖ Magazine: *The Dial*
- ❖ Brook Farm: communal living experiment

Major Transcendentalist Works:

- ❖ **Ralph Waldo Emerson**
“Self-Reliance” 1841
- ❖ **Henry David Thoreau**
Walden 1854
“Civil Disobedience”

Anti-Transcendentalists include:

- ❖ Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville
- ❖ Both explore the darker side of nature and human nature
- ❖ Both consider life in its tragic dimension, a combination of good and evil

“Self-Reliance” – Emerson:

- ❖ “There is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide...”
- ❖ “Trust thyself...”
- ❖ “Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist.”
- ❖ “Speak what you think now in hard words and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said today. – ‘Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.’ – Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.”
- ❖ “I hate quotations. Tell me what you know.”
- ❖ “All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better.”

***Walden, or Life in the Woods* - Henry David Thoreau**

- ❖ On July 4th, 1845 Thoreau began his experiment in “essential” living—living simply, studying the natural world, and seeking truth within himself.
- ❖ On land owned by Emerson near Concord, Massachusetts, Thoreau built a small cabin by Walden Pond and lived there for more than two years, writing and studying nature.

Excerpts from *Walden*

- ❖ "To have done anything just for money is to have been truly idle.”
- ❖ "Most of the luxuries and many of the so-called comforts of life are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. " - *Walden*
- ❖ "Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth." - *Walden*
- ❖ “Still we live meanly, like ants.”

- ❖ “Our life is frittered away by detail.”
- ❖ “Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?”
- ❖ “However mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names. It is not so bad as you are.”
- ❖ “The fault-finder will find faults even in paradise. Love your life, poor as it is. You may perhaps have some pleasant, thrilling, glorious hours, even in a poorhouse.”

“Civil Disobedience” - Henry David Thoreau

- ❖ Thoreau’s essay urging passive, nonviolent resistance to governmental policies to which an individual is morally opposed
- ❖ Written after Thoreau spent a night in jail after refusing to pay a poll tax.
- ❖ Thoreau refused to pay the \$1.50 tax because the revenues went to the government which was allowing slavery to continue and which was waging an unjust war against Mexico.
- ❖ Influenced individuals such as Ghandi, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. & Cesar Chavez

Excerpts:

- ❖ “That government is best which governs least...That government is best which governs not at all.
- ❖ “I ask for, not at once no government, but *at once* a better government.”
- ❖ “I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as *my* government which is the *slave’s* government also.”
- ❖ “If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government let it go...but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine.”
- ❖ “Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison...It is there that the fugitive slave, and the Mexican prisoner on parole, and the Indian come to plead the wrongs of the race should find them..”
- ❖ “If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the definition of a peaceable revolution...”