Literary History: Transcendentalism

According to Ralph Waldo Emerson, the preeminent Transcendentalist of his day, the human mind is so powerful it can unlock any mystery, from the intricacies of nature to the wonder of God.

Transcendentalism: The Seekers

For the Transcendentalists, the loose-knit group of writers, artists, and reformers who flourished in the 1830s and 1840s, the individual was at the center of the universe, more powerful than any institution, whether political or religious. So it is fitting that the most influential literary and philosophical movement in American history began with the struggles of one man.

A Crisis of Confidence In the early 1830s, a young Boston pastor found himself wrestling with his faith. His beloved wife had died, and he began questioning his beliefs. At the time, many institutions downplayed the importance of the individual. The Industrial Revolution had shown that machines could actually replace people, that individuals did not matter.

The pastor was troubled by this notion. He believed, on the contrary, that the human mind was the most important force in the universe. The pastor was so passionate about his search for a new way of thinking that he resigned his position and traveled to Europe to visit with some of the great philosophers of the day.

That pastor was Ralph Waldo Emerson, and his crisis of confidence became a revolution in American thought. When Emerson returned to the United States in 1833, he helped forge the Transcendentalist movement.

The Individual Is the World The Transcendentalist movement lasted a mere ten years and produced only two major books—Emerson’s Nature (1836) and Thoreau’s Walden (1854). Yet its influence on American life and letters continues to this day. According to Emerson, the human mind is so powerful it can unlock any mystery, from the intricacies of nature to the wonder of God. To Emerson, “the individual is the world.” This was a radical thought in an age that gave all authority to the organized institutions of government, religion, and education.

Emerson first proposed his ideas in 1833 in a speech at Harvard University. Then, he took his ideas further, proposing that every soul and all of nature was part of an “Over-Soul,” a universal spirit to which all beings return after death. In other words, every being is part of God’s mind.

Meetings of Great Minds Many people denounced Emerson as a heretic, but his supporters flocked to his home in Concord, Massachusetts. During the height of Transcendentalist activities, Concord attracted so many great minds that it was dubbed the “Athens of America.”
Among Emerson's admirers was Amos Bronson Alcott, whose beliefs about education revolutionized American schools. Alcott insisted that students should not be taught through routine memorization, but should instead be challenged to think, debate, and discuss. Feminist author and editor Margaret Fuller was another eminent Transcendentalist. Along with Emerson, Fuller was the driving force behind the Transcendentalist journal *The Dial.*

Emerson's most famous protégé was Henry David Thoreau. As a twenty-year-old student, Thoreau heard Emerson speak at Harvard and was thrilled by his ideas. Not content merely to discuss Transcendentalist philosophy, Thoreau wanted to put it into action. In 1845, he built a rough cottage in the woods at Walden Pond and went there to live alone, in harmony with nature, untied to material things. Thoreau lived at Walden Pond for two years and wrote about his experiences in his collection of essays, *Walden.*

**A Lasting Legacy** Like other Transcendentalists, Thoreau was a fierce abolitionist. To protest slavery and the Mexican War, he refused to pay taxes and was imprisoned. Although Thoreau spent only one night in jail, the experience gave him insights into the relationship of individuals to government. The theory of nonviolent civil disobedience that he developed has had a profound effect on society throughout the world. During India's struggle for independence in the 1940s, Mahatma Gandhi adopted Thoreau's ideas. In America, nonviolent protest served as the guiding principle for Martin Luther King, Jr., during the civil rights movement.

The influence of the Transcendentalists is so woven into the fabric of American culture that we take it for granted. Yet whenever we celebrate the individual, look to the natural world as a mirror of human lives, or state a belief in the power of intuition to grasp fundamental truths, we owe a debt to the great, brief meeting of minds in Concord.

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### Speaking and Listening: Small Group Discussion

#### Comprehension and Collaboration

The Transcendentalists believed that no institution should be as powerful as the individual. With a small group, discuss the role of the individual in our society today. Use these questions to guide your discussion:

- How much power do formal institutions have in our society? Support your position with examples.
- In what ways do individuals make a difference in our society?
- Should individuals have more power than they do? Why or why not?

Choose a point person to share your group's conclusions with the class.