TRANSCENDENTALISM

Transcendentalism is an American literary, political, and philosophical movement of the early nineteenth century, centered around Ralph Waldo Emerson. Other important transcendentalists were Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller. Stimulated by Romanticism, the transcendentalists operated with the sense that a new era was at hand. They were critics of their contemporary society for its unthinking conformity, and urged that each person find, in Emerson’s words, “an original relation to the universe.” Emerson and Thoreau sought this relation in solitude amidst nature, and in their writing. By the 1840s they, along with other transcendentalists, were engaged in the social experiments of Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and Walden; and, by the 1850s in an increasingly urgent critique of American slavery.


Transcendentalists believed...

...in the innate divinity of all people and faith in their capability to understand immortality, the soul, and God through intuition rather than through pure reason.

...that human beings are the center of the universe and share a direct kinship with nature.

...that we are capable of “transcending” human experience and understanding high laws.

...that in order to live a good and fruitful life, human beings should live close to nature, be independent, and trust in their own intelligence for moral guidance.

Major Themes of Transcendentalism

1. Reliance on intuition and conscience
2. Personal Revelations
3. Living close to Nature
4. Dignity of manual labor
5. Need of intellectual companions and interests
6. Spiritual living emphasized
7. God- a personal matter- No church
8. Divinity of man and one brotherhood
9. Oversoul: MAN-GOD-NATURE all belong to one and the same force
10. Self-reliance and self-trust
11. “Belief that man can intuitively transcend the limits of his senses to receive higher truths.”

Romanticism and Transcendentalism

Romanticism: A movement that flourished in literature, philosophy, music, and art in Western culture during most of the nineteenth century, beginning as a revolt against classicism. Romanticism essentially upholds feelings and the imagination over reason and fact. Romanticism favors the picturesque, the emotional, the exotic, and the mysterious.

Transcendentalism: A philosophy which holds that basic truths can be reached through intuition rather than through reason. Transcendentalism glorifies nature and upholds the notion that people are basically good and perfectible.