



Transcendentalism: Impact on American Literature

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Lesson Transcript

Ask a Question

This video defines Transcendentalism, a literary movement of the mid-19th century. Authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman used their literary platforms to encourage Americans to transcend society's presumptions and create a personal, progressive relationship with spirituality and nature.

Definition of Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism was an idealistic literary and philosophical movement of the mid-19th century. Beginning in New England in 1836, various visionaries, intellectuals, scholars, and writers would come together regularly to discuss spiritual ideas. The Boston newspapers, which advertised their meetings, called the group the **Transcendentalists**. In this video, we will explore the main ideas of Transcendentalism, along with some of the key figures of this important American literary movement.

The Transcendentalists were radical thinkers. At the time of their meetings, New England was still holding on to a remnant of Puritanical values. There was a sense that organized religion had authority over one's personal life and individual choices. For the Transcendentalists, this was a big no-no! They were quite critical of conformity, or forcing one's behavior to match social expectations or standards. They were **nonconformists** - people who do not conform to a generally accepted pattern of thought or action. They rejected common ideas and practices, particularly organized religion. There wasn't a Transcendentalist church or a holy book of Transcendentalism. Instead, there were regular meetings for lively conversation and a shared hope of cultivating a modern, fluid, and personal sense of spirituality.

Transcendentalist Ideas



Emerson was at the heart of the American Transcendentalist movement

Now bear with me, I know this sounds a bit voodoo or New Age: the Transcendentalists believed that for every person there exists a private relationship between the self and the universe. In fact, they believed that each person carries the universe within himself. They thought that every individual has a universal soul, referred to as '**The Eternal One.**' **Ralph Waldo Emerson**, an American essayist and poet, was at the center of the Transcendentalist movement. He explained the idea of the universal soul by stating that 'within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty; to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE.' Basically, Emerson is saying that all of the world, its knowledge and splendor, lives within us. This certainly sounds like an idea that might be discussed on Oprah's couch!

In addition to the universal soul, the Transcendentalists believed in **intuitive thought**, which is the ability to know something through instinctive feeling rather than conscious reasoning. They believed that one should guide her life by what she feels to be true. We've all had flashes of intuition: grabbing an umbrella on a perfectly sunny day or sensing that someone's about to call right before the phone rings. The Transcendentalists believed that these flashes of intuition were the most fundamental form of knowledge. Intuition should have precedence over the intellect, according to the Transcendentalists, because intuition was provided by the universal soul.

Transcendentalism was really a hodgepodge of ideas. The Transcendentalists were very well read and borrowed from Puritanism (the bits they liked), German Idealism, Eastern religions, and more. They merged and fused concepts, creating a flexible set of values. They valued simplicity, a life not bound to material possessions. They valued **self-reliance**, or a reliance on one's own powers and resources rather than those of others, and trust in one's own heart and thoughts. They valued openness, openness to the beauty of the world.

Transcendentalism's Impact on American Literature

The impact of Transcendentalism on American literature can easily be seen today. For example, I think immediately of Elizabeth Gilbert's bestselling memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*. In the book, Gilbert goes on a journey both physically and spiritually. Recently divorced, she finds self-reliance. She comes to value the beauty of the everyday (pasta!). She meditates, hoping to connect with the 'Eternal One' within her. The Transcendentalists, particularly Emerson, perpetuated the idea that writers are seers. It's the writer's duty to see the world clearly, to summon the world to life. Emerson called

poets 'liberating gods.' Literature was a platform to liberate people, to help them see what needs to be seen: nature, spirituality, self-identity, and social injustice. The Transcendentalists were forceful critics of slavery and gender inequality. In transcendental theory, every individual has to be respected because every individual has a universal soul.

Transcendentalists also placed significant emphasis on **imagination**. Imagination allows the mind to be resourceful, to form new ideas that are not present to the senses. As the writer or reader imagines, he transcends himself. This allows him to move beyond his personal experience, his mind and body, to consider something anew. The ability to imagine can effect change. The Transcendentalists wanted their work to have an altering effect on individuals and on society as a whole. For the Transcendentalists, man needed to live in the world, participate in it, look at it closely, and take action.

Ask a Question

Important Figures in Transcendentalism



Thoreau spent two years on Walden Pond

Ralph Waldo Emerson was at the heart of the American transcendental movement. He was a graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Divinity School. He spent his early days as a minister, but he resigned after his first wife's death. His first significant work, the essay '**Nature**', was published in 1836. This essay was seminal to Transcendentalism. It explored Emerson's admiration for the natural world, a world he believed to be infused with the divine. He encouraged people to explore nature, to study it. In studying the natural world, one also studied the nature of man. This relates back to the idea of the 'Eternal One,' that each person carries the universe within. Solitary time in nature was the surest way for a person to connect with the universe, according to Emerson.

Emerson lived in Concord, Massachusetts, amid a small mix of inquisitive, progressive individuals. Together with other Transcendentalists, he started a magazine called *The Dial*. *The Dial* helped make the ideas of Transcendentalists available to the public. Emerson was also a prolific lecturer. He traveled often to share his essays and ideas. I think of Emerson as a very kind-hearted and spiritual man, sort of a 19th-century version of Deepak Chopra.

Henry David Thoreau, a writer and naturalist, was greatly affected by Emerson's writings and formed a close friendship with him. He often published his poems and essays in *The Dial*. In 1845, he built a tiny cabin on some of Emerson's land at the shores of Walden Pond. He stayed there for

two years. This experiment of simple, self-sufficient living was Transcendentalism in practice. Thoreau immersed himself in nature and solitude (when he wanted it), though his cabin was right at the outskirts of town. He became a learned **naturalist**, an expert in or student of natural history, one expertly adept at observing nature. In 1854, Thoreau's book **Walden** was published. The book shared his experience at Walden Pond and emphasized man's need for closeness with nature. What a truly Transcendental idea!

Walt Whitman was an American poet who was also heavily influenced by Transcendentalism. In fact, he believed that he was just the sort of poet that Emerson was looking for when he envisioned the poet's role as a seer, a 'liberating god.' Clearly, Whitman wasn't a guy who lacked confidence. Whitman's poems considered themes of transcendental thought. More importantly, the style of his poems was bold and modern. Whitman is often cited as the father of **free verse**, a type of poetry that does not conform to regular meter or rhyme. The lines of his poems were considered very irregular for the time. Whitman authored the poetry collection **Leaves of Grass**, which was published in 1855. Though the book dealt with transcendental themes of nature and the role of the spirit, its sensuality was quite controversial.

Ask a Question



Whitman is known as the father of free verse poetry

In the time that they were living, the Transcendentalists were really rebels. Though today we look at pictures of them with their lovely grandfather-like faces in black and white, they were quite modern in their day. They helped to shape the very American notion of **individuality** and the importance of recognizing each person's moral worth. This stands for everyone, regardless of race or gender. They championed independence and self-reliance.

Lesson Summary

In summary, Transcendentalism was an American literary and philosophical movement that lasted from the 1830s to the 1850s. The key beliefs of the movement were:

1. **The 'Eternal One'**: Every individual carries the universe within himself and is entitled to his own personal relationship with spirituality.
2. **Intuitive thought**: Intuition should have precedence over conscious thought. Intuition is the most fundamental form of knowledge.
3. **Imagination**: Imagination allows a person to transcend himself, to consider things anew.