

Transcendentalism



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What does “transcendentalism” mean?

- There is an ideal spiritual state which “transcends” the physical and empirical.
- A loose collection of eclectic ideas about literature, philosophy, religion, social reform, and the general state of American culture.
- Transcendentalism had different meanings for each person involved in the movement.

Where did it come from?

- Ralph Waldo Emerson gave German philosopher Immanuel Kant credit for popularizing the term “transcendentalism.”
- It began as a reform movement in the Unitarian church.
- It is not a religion—more accurately, it is a philosophy or form of spirituality.
- It centered around Boston and Concord, MA. in the mid-1800’s.
- Emerson first expressed his philosophy of transcendentalism in his essay *Nature*.

What did Transcendentalists believe?

The intuitive faculty, instead of the rational or sensical, became the means for a conscious union of the individual psyche (known in Sanskrit as *Atman*) with the world psyche also known as the Oversoul, life-force, prime mover and God (known in Sanskrit as *Brahma*).

Basic Premise #1



An individual is the spiritual center of the universe, and in an individual can be found the clue to nature, history and, ultimately, the cosmos itself. It is not a rejection of the existence of God, but a preference to explain an individual and the world in terms of an individual.

Basic Premise #2

The structure of the universe literally duplicates the structure of the individual self—all knowledge, therefore, begins with self-knowledge. This is similar to Aristotle's dictum "know thyself."



Basic Premise #3

Transcendentalists accepted the concept of nature as a living mystery, full of signs; nature is symbolic.



Basic Premise #4

The belief that individual virtue and happiness depend upon self-realization—this depends upon the reconciliation of two universal psychological tendencies:

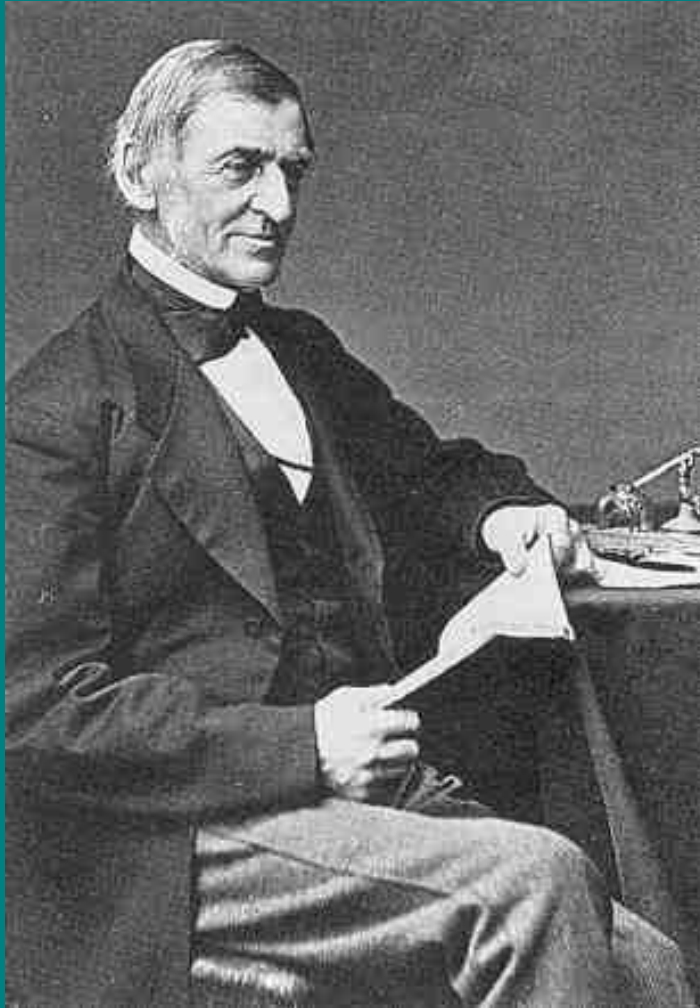
1. The desire to embrace the whole world—to know and become one with the world.
2. The desire to withdraw, remain unique and separate—an egotistical existence.

Who were the Transcendentalists?

- Ralph Waldo Emerson
- Henry David Thoreau
- Amos Bronson Alcott
- Margaret Fuller
- Ellery Channing



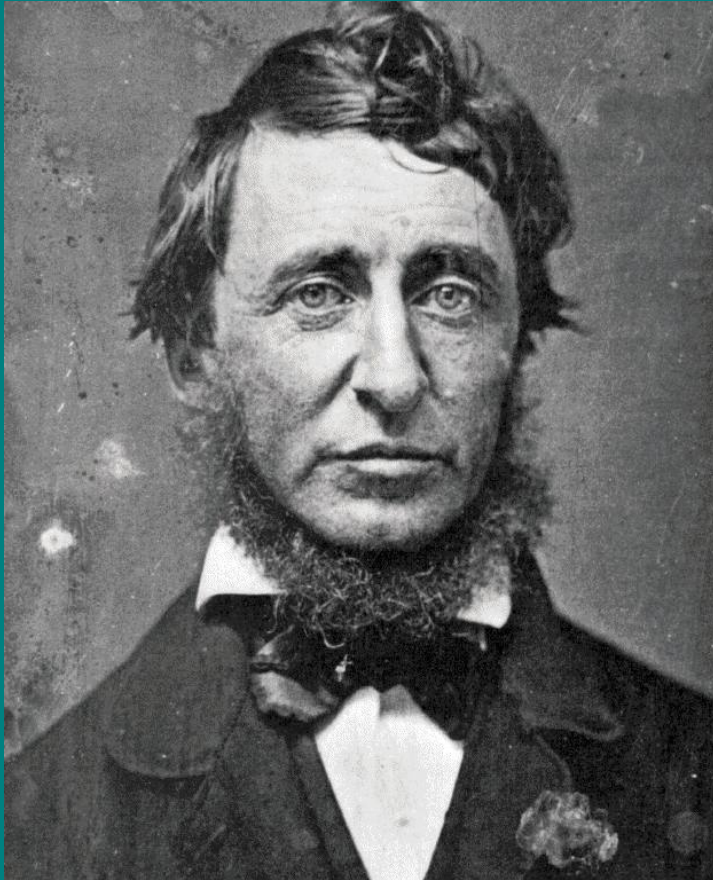
Ralph Waldo Emerson



- 1803-1882
- Unitarian minister
- Poet and essayist
- Founded the Transcendental Club
- Popular lecturer
- Banned from Harvard for 40 years following his Divinity School address
- Supporter of abolitionism



Henry David Thoreau

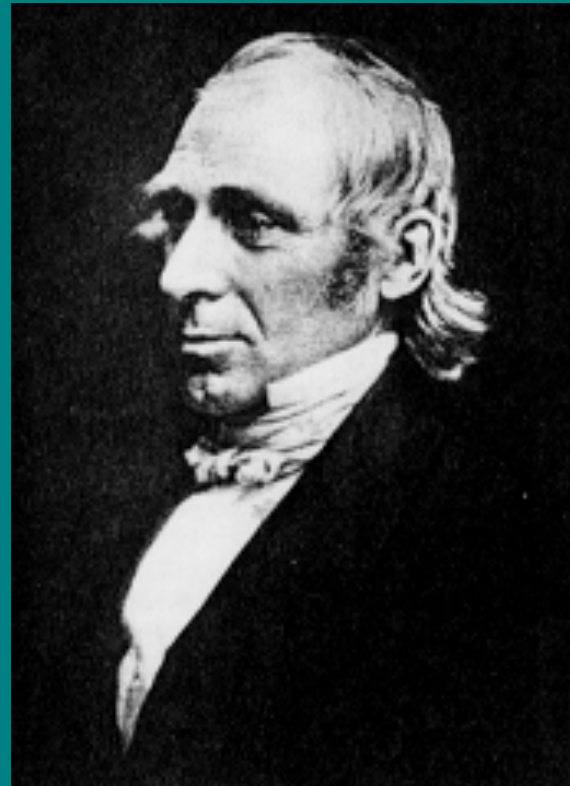


- 1817-1862
- Schoolteacher, essayist, poet
- Most famous for *Walden* and *Civil Disobedience*
- Influenced environmental movement
- Supporter of abolitionism



AMOS BRONSON ALCOTT

- 1799-1888
- Teacher and writer
- Founder of Temple School and Fruitlands
- Introduced art, music, P.E., nature study, and field trips; banished corporal punishment
- Father of novelist Louisa May Alcott



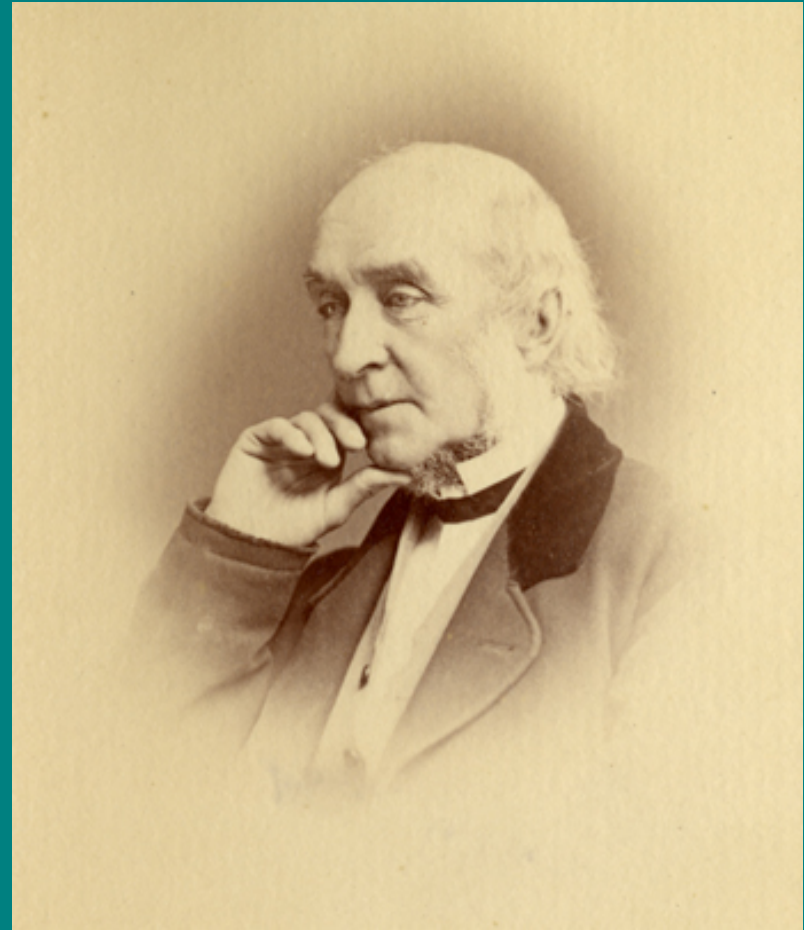
Margaret Fuller

- 1810-1850
- Journalist, critic, women's rights activist
- First editor of *The Dial*, a transcendental journal
- First female journalist to work on a major newspaper—*The New York Tribune*
- Taught at Alcott's Temple School



Ellery Channing

- 1818-1901
- Poet and especially close friend of Thoreau
- Published the first biography of Thoreau in 1873—*Thoreau, The Poet-Naturalist*



Resources

- American Transcendental Web:
<http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/index.html>
- American Transcendentalism:
<http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/amtrans.htm>
- PAL: Chapter Four
<http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap4/4intro.html>