

Transcendentalism Background Information

In the 1830s, Ralph Waldo Emerson, a prominent Unitarian minister, left the church to seek a more meaningful religious experience. Emerson argued that individuals could discover truth and God within themselves without belonging to a church or holding to a particular set of religious beliefs. He began to lecture and write about religion and the world, and formed a discussion group with other men and women who had also broken from the church. This group of people accepted Emerson's idea that truth "transcends" (or goes beyond) what people observe with their senses in the physical world. They called their group the Transcendental Club, and soon they established a new religious, philosophical, and literary movement. At first focusing on the "inner self," many Transcendentalists later became involved in social reform.

And so Transcendentalism was born. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds...A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men."

Henry David Thoreau joined Emerson's circle of Transcendental friends, and built a hut at Walden Pond on property owned by Emerson. For a few years, Thoreau lived off the land, meditated, and wrote about nature. Thoreau agreed with Emerson's view that reform begins with the individual, and began to stop paying his taxes in protest against slavery. The tax collector ignored his tax evasion until Thoreau began to publicly condemn the U.S. invasion and occupation of Mexico. Thoreau was then arrested for tax evasion and spent a night in jail. Thoreau wrote his famous essay, "Civil Disobedience" after this night in jail. Thoreau's minor act of defiance led him to conclude that it was not enough to simply be against slavery and the war. Thoreau decided that a person of conscious needed to act. Unlike other advocates of civil disobedience like Martin Luther King, Jr., Thoreau did not rule out using violence against an unjust government.

Transcendentalists believed in the unity of all creation and that human nature contained something that transcended, or went beyond, ordinary experience. They believed that every person was divine, and so to trust or rely on the self was to trust God who spoke within us. Transcendentalists maintained that through intuition we transcend the limits of our senses and reason and come to know higher truths.

Themes of Transcendentalism:

Universal Spirit: Emerson found divine energy in all living things. Emerson called this energy the universal spirit, universal consciousness, over-soul, or God. In Emerson's way of thinking, this universal spirit gave all life meaning and purpose. From it came all truth, beauty, and goodness. Emerson believed that God was present in every form in nature, as well as in every human being, regardless of race,

religion, or social status. Transcendentalists believed that everyone needed to find and form their own meaningful relationship with the universal spirit.

Self-Reliance/ Intuition: Emerson counseled his followers to seek God by looking inward. Individuals should rely on their own heart and moral compass to guide their lives. He advised followers to “trust your intuition,” since the source of this insight was God.

Self and Society: Emerson rejected the Puritan belief that all humans are born as sinful creatures. He held a much more optimistic view that all men and women possessed a natural capacity to do good and for society to progress. Emerson taught, however, that individuals would first have to reform themselves before they could change society. Transcendentalists believed that social activism was a direct result of an increased relationship with God and self.

Direct Relationship with God and Nature: Transcendentalists believed that man had removed himself too far from enjoying, appreciating, and learning from Nature. They believed that in nature you could fully commune with God, learn of your relationship in the world, and eschew modern conveniences in favor of using your mind to help you learn higher truths about the human experience.

Transcendental influence went beyond literature:

Transcendental reformers took Emerson’s advice to “Be an opener of doors for those who come after us;” and they were able to open doors for many others to discover their own paths to a better America. Transcendental ideas later opened the door for the abolition of slavery, women’s rights, progressive education, and in the 1960’s, Martin Luther King, Jr. and anti-Vietnam war activists revived Transcendental arguments for civil disobedience.