Transcendentalism Study Guide

Transcendentalism

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

A religious, philosophical and literary movement, Transcendentalism arose in New England in the middle of the nineteenth century. Critics generally cite 1836 to 1846 as the years when the movement flourished, although its influence continued to be felt in later decades, with some works considered part of the movement not being published until the 1850s. Transcendentalism began as a religious concept rooted in the ideas of American democracy. When a group of Boston ministers, one of whom was Ralph Waldo Emerson, decided that the Unitarian Church had become too conservative, they espoused a new religious philosophy, one which privileged the inherent wisdom in the human soul over church doctrine and law.

Among Transcendentalism's followers were writers Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Walt Whitman; educator Bronson Alcott; and social theorists and reformers Theodore Parker and William Ellery Channing. Authors Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, and Edgar Allen Poe also felt the influence of Transcendentalism. Important works from the movement include Emerson's *Nature*, "The American Scholar," and "Self Reliance"; Thoreau's *Walden*; Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*; and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Novels such as Melville's *Moby Dick* and Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* also had transcendentalist leanings.

It is no coincidence that this movement took off just as the American literary tradition was beginning to blossom. Transcendentalism□though inspired by German and British Romanticism□was a distinctly American movement in that it was tied into notions of American individualism. In addition to the theme of American democracy, transcendentalist literature also promotes the idea of nature as divine and the human soul as inherently wise. Transcendentalism also had a political dimension, and writers such as Thoreau put their transcendentalist beliefs into action through acts of civil disobedience to the government. The nineteenth century was a volatile one, beginning with the hope and promise of democracy and the development of an American identity and moving towards mass devastation and division by the middle of the century. Slavery and the Civil War, women's rights, growing industrialism and class division □all of these events were influential and each had a role to play in the transcendentalist movement.

Themes

Self-Wisdom

Quite simply, Transcendentalism is based on the belief that human beings have self-wisdom and may gain this knowledge or wisdom by tuning in to the ebb and flow of nature. Transcendentalism revolves around the self, specifically the betterment of the self. Where Emerson and his followers differed from earlier philosophical and religious beliefs was in the idea that human beings had innate knowledge and could connect with God directly rather than through an institution such as organized religion. Transcendentalism celebrated the self, an important step in the construction of American identity, better understood as the notion of American individualism□one of the cornerstones of American democracy.

Different writers conceived of the search for self-knowledge in different ways. Whitman's response was a grand celebration of the self in all its complexity and beauty and contradictions. He begins the poem "Song of Myself" with the bold line, "I celebrate myself." He offers up to his readers, "I loafe and invite my Soul, / I lean and loafe at my ease . . . observing a spear of summer grass." *Leaves of Grass* is filled with such celebration.

Thoreau took a slightly different path toward self-knowledge. *Walden* is a study of solitude. He says, "I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. . . . I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude." For him, self-discovery comes as the result of intense reflection. Self-knowledge has political implications as well. Once the individual has established a moral code, it becomes his or her duty to peacefully protest and engage in civil disobedience against the government should governmental policies violate that code. Thoreau's opposition to slavery led to his refusal to pay a poll tax supporting the Mexican War, an act that landed him in jail for a night. For Thoreau, self-discovery was not simply an intangible concept, it was a way of living.

Nature and Its Meaning

Nature is the focal point for much transcendentalist thought and writing. As a theme, it is so central to the movement that Emerson's cornerstone essay is entitled *Nature* and serves as an investigation into nature and its relationship to the soul. For transcendentalists, nature and the soul were inextricably linked. In the rhythms and seasons of the natural world, transcendentalists found comfort and divinity. In the increasingly industrialized and fragmented world in which they lived, the search for meaning in nature was of great importance.

Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, Fuller, Melville, and others saw possibility, liberation, and beauty in nature. Emerson writes in *Nature*, "Let us interrogate the great

apparition, that shines so peacefully around us. Let us inquire, to what end is nature?" For Emerson, nature is a direct line to God, and its "meaning" is directly linked to God's "meaning." His definition of God and meaning is clearly different than that of the conservative Unitarian Church from which he split.

A follower of Emerson, Thoreau took ideas from Emerson's work and put them into practice. He saw nature as not just an awe-inspiring force but a way of life. Thoreau offers up the following advice in *Walden*: "Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails." For Thoreau, nature is pure because it is free from commercialization and industrialization. It is both a respite and a teacher. The transcendentalists were not reactionary or opposed to the modernization of the world; they were, however, concerned that such modernization could lead to alienation. Nature provided a way to keep humans in touch with their souls and with their spiritual foundations.

Social Reform

Regarding social issues, transcendentalists were considered visionaries in their attitudes toward such issues as social protest, elimination of slavery, women's rights, creative and participatory education for children, and labor reform. Transcendentalism became a venue for social reform because it revolved around the idea of liberation. Transcendentalist writers may have had as their immediate goal the liberation of the soul, but that goal expanded to social liberation as more and more thinkers joined the transcendentalist school of thought.

Founded as an alternative to conservative, organized religion, Transcendentalism had countercultural tendencies from its inception. From the free flowing, free verse of Whitman to the civil disobedience of Thoreau to Fuller's radical notion that men and women were social and intellectual equals, the movement was engaged in many controversial social arenas.

As the editor of the transcendentalist publication *The Dial*, Fuller often published controversial pieces. As the author of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, she invited debate and controversy. Her essay is a call to action for women and men to change society. She laments:

> The lot of Woman is sad. She is constituted to expect
> and need happiness that cannot exist on earth.
> She must stifle such aspirations within her secret
> heart, and fit herself, as well as she can, for a life of
> resignations and consolations.

Clearly this is not an acceptable life to Fuller, just as slavery is unacceptable to Thoreau. In "Resistance to Civil Government," Thoreau states, "Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?" Thoreau's answer was to

transgress, and go to jail if necessary, for as he says, "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison."

Along with slavery and gender issues, class issues also came to the forefront in the nineteenth century, revealing a new kind of slavery□wage slavery. Transcendentalists experimented with socialist communes, such as George Ripley's Brook Farm and Alcott's Fruitlands. These experiments were short lived. The legacy of civil disobedience served America and the world well, as it went on to inspire Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., to lead peaceful social protests. In addition, Fuller is often read as a precursor to modern feminism and is seen as a woman ahead of her time.

Style

Free Verse

Though many transcendentalist writers used the essay form to express their ideas, Whitman used poetry, specifically free verse. Characterized by irregular line length and a lack of rhyme or regular rhythm, free verse breaks conventional rules of poetic rhyme and meter. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* builds its own rhythms with the repetition of words and phrases, sometimes called "cataloging." Lines, ideas, and images flow freely, unbroken by regular stanzas or set rules. Free verse was suitable for a transcendentalist poet such as Whitman because the content of his poems matched the freedom of the form. The themes Whitman embraced in poems such as "Song of Myself"□a celebration of the soul, of love, desire, sexuality, and pleasure□were better expressed in a more radical style versus a conventional style. Both the form and the content caught critics' and readers' attention (some for the better, some for the worse). Whitman's use of free verse at that time in the nation's history made him a lasting name in the American literary canon.

Romanticism

An outgrowth of English Romanticism (1789-1832), yet still strong in its own right, American Romanticism is often called the American Renaissance because it marked a rebirth in American literature. Critics identify this period of American rebirth as beginning with the Jacksonian era in 1828 and lasting to the Civil War in 1865. This era produced authors such as Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorn, Fuller, Dickinson, and Poe, along with a whole host of popular writers of serialized fiction, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe. American literature was, for the first time, held in high esteem in this country and taken seriously in Europe. American Romanticism certainly had a European heritage, borrowing some key elements. First, the English romantics focused on nature, viewing it as a catalyst for thinking and deep reflection. American transcendentalists took this idea and built upon it. Secondly, English Romanticism was about overflowing, powerful emotions. The overflow of powerful emotions characterized such pieces as Emerson's *Nature* and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Romanticism is also humanistic in its view of the world. Transcendentalists embraced humanity and the human spirit, believing strongly in democratic ideals and human potential.

Tone

The tone of Transcendentalism is, in a word, exalted. The feelings expressed by transcendentalist writers are intense, the ideas serious, the reflection deep and meaningful. Transcendentalism was an intellectual movement, led by highly educated people. It was not a movement of the masses, though it certainly had an effect on the masses in the long run. The tone of the writing might be best understood in comparison

to other writing of the day. At the same time that transcendentalists were writing, popular fiction was gaining ground with the American reading public. Dime novels, serialized novels, sentimental fiction, tales of the city□there were literally dozens of different types of novels circulating and claiming large reading audiences. In fact, Hawthorne is famous for complaining in a letter to his publisher about the "damned mob of scribbling women" writing popular fiction and affecting his book sales. Transcendentalists wanted to create an intellectual tradition, rooted in spirituality and American democracy. The argument can certainly be made that popular fiction commanded an intellectual debate as well and tackled serious issues of the day. But transcendentalists were attempting to create an American aesthetic, and this is reflected in their language and tone.

Historical Context

The Rise of Industry

While critics generally assign Transcendentalism to the ten-year period between 1836 and 1846, the movement was tied to a much larger chunk of the middle part of that century, beginning with the election of Andrew Jackson to the United States presidency in 1829 and extending through the Civil War period (1860-1865). Jackson and his fellow Democrats claimed to represent the common person and fought against large corporations and excesses of wealth. Industry boomed as the nineteenth century began, with many technological innovations coming to fruition. The century saw huge population gains, with an influx of immigrants from Europe and Asia; the expansion of territories westward, which led to the displacement of thousands of Native Americans; improvements to the printing press; the development of hundreds of miles of railroads; and the continual transformation from a nation of farmers to a nation of industry and urbanization. In cities, poverty and crime skyrocketed. Union organizers worked tirelessly against wage slavery, while many Americans made their fortunes. Textile mills were built in the Northeast, sparking controversy about whether they represented a way for women to earn a living or a pathway into wage slavery with no escape.

For a time, the economy seemed to boom, until 1837, when recession set in. The panic of 1837 is, in many ways, comparable to the Great Depression of the 1930s. The recession meant lean times for many Americans, and it led writers such as Thoreau to question industrialization. "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," he wrote in *Walden*. Writers and thinkers debated meaning and material goods. Thoreau made his position clear: "Most of the luxuries, and many of the socalled comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind." Although the recession certainly impacted the American economy, the middle class continued to grow and develop during the middle of the century.

Reform

A lot was happening in the middle of the century that divided the country. The slavery issue was a major hotbed of debate, especially once the Fugitive Slave Law was passed in 1850, which stated that escaped slaves in the North could be caught and taken back to the South, and into slavery. The law sparked much controversy, a debate further fueled by publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852. Stowe was one of many authors writing about slavery, with abolitionist literature prevalent in the North along with slave narratives by such authors as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. Slavery was opposed on moral, philosophical, and economic grounds.

Transcendentalist writers had a curious position in relation to abolitionism. Whitman opposed slavery but never took a strong abolitionist stance. Writers like Emerson and

Hawthorne were not focused strongly on the issue, though it certainly informs their work in both subtle and overt ways. Thoreau had the strongest sentiment against slavery and wrote about it in his essay "Resistance to Civil Government."

The antislavery movement and the women's rights movement overlapped in many ways. Women could not vote, or seek divorce from their husbands. Women's rights activists and antislavery activists saw parallels in their causes in that slavery added an extra burden for black women: not only were they considered property, their bodies were subject to sexual exploitation at the hands of their white masters. Antislavery activists such as Stowe appealed to white women of the North to see the horror of the situation. Women were becoming more and more vocal and rallying support for their cause. The 1848 Seneca Falls convention held in New York was the largest gathering of women's rights advocates the nation had seen. Frederick Douglass spoke, along with dozens of other women's rights advocates. Women's rights activists were fighting laws that held women back as well as fighting to change attitudes. Antebellum America (or pre-Civil War America) was separated into two distinct spheres: the public and the private. The marketplace (where men worked and made a living) was the public sphere, and the private sphere (the home) was relegated to women. The "cult of true womanhood" was the prevailing notion of the day, preaching that women should be pure, pious, domestic, and obedient to their husbands. Writers such as Fuller wrote against the notion of "true womanhood" and the strict separation of spheres. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, Lydia Maria Child, and dozens of other women□some famous, some not□fought for women's rights long after the Seneca Falls convention and the Civil War.

Movement Variations

Education

Transcendentalism extended into many areas of social reform, including the educational system. When Alcott came to Boston in 1828, he had definite ideas about children's education. An idealist and visionary, he became involved in the transcendentalist movement, with a passion for educating young children. Alcott believed the key to a better society was education—an idea still dominant in the twenty-first century. Alcott's focus on very young children was ahead of its time in the nineteenth century, when the popular belief was that young children were simply tiny adults.

Alcott developed his educational model using the ideas of Plato. Plato held that before birth, a person's soul resided in a spiritual realm, together with all of the other souls waiting to be born. When a person was born, his/her soul was "called" to him/her. Hence, Alcott reasoned that children were closest to birth and therefore closest to that preexisting spiritual state. Young children had better intuition, he believed, and their minds were more open and less cluttered than those of adults. Paul F. Boller, in his book *American Transcendentalism, 1830-1860*, summarizes Alcott's philosophy thus: "Education, then, should be directed to the very young, and it should be centered on drawing out of them the moral and spiritual truths latent in the intuitive Reason they all possess." In 1834, Alcott opened a school in the Masonic temple in Boston, which came to be known as Temple School. Fuller also taught there. Thirty preteen boys and girls attended the school. Alcott used the Socratic method of teaching, that is, asking questions to elicit answers he believed the children already held within them. They read stories and poems and had lively discussions. Alcott also believed in the importance of physical exercise for young children, and so part of their time was devoted to that as well.

The downfall of Temple School was the publication of a book of "conversations" held at the school. These conversations were religious in nature, and considered radical, even sacrilegious, because Alcott dared to speak of scripture and scriptural interpretation with young children. While many of his fellow transcendentalists supported him, he was attacked in the newspapers, and enrollment greatly suffered. By the late 1830s, the school had shut down, with the final straw being Alcott's acceptance of a black child into the school. While Alcott was certainly ahead of his time in his thinking, 1830s Boston was not fully prepared for him. He went on to establish an experimental community near Boston called Fruitlands; it was a very small community, never attracting more than a handful of people. Alcott's daughter, Louisa May Alcott, went on to write books for adults and young people, including *Little Women*.

The Transcendental Club

Transcendentalism was an intellectual movement, characterized by lively philosophical and moral debates. The Transcendental Club was a loose gathering of intellectuals who discussed everything from truth, reason, and spirituality to social reform and slavery. The first meeting was in 1836 at George Ripley's home in Boston. Emerson, Alcott, Fuller, Thoreau, James Freeman Clarke, Parker, Orestes Brownson, Channing, and Frederic Hedge were some of the regular attendees. Critic Boller says, "Alcott, along with Ralph Waldo Emerson . . . described it as 'a company of earnest persons enjoying conversations on high themes and having much in common.'" The formation of the club marked the beginning of the transcendentalist movement. Though the meetings of the club declined after a few years and eventually ceased to exist, the ideas discussed and debated in the meetings continued to shape the movement not just in literary ways but in philosophical and religious ways as well.

Representative Authors

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

Writer and thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson was born May 25, 1803, in Boston, Massachusetts. Emerson is widely regarded as a key figure in transcendentalist thought and literature. After graduating from Harvard University in 1821, Emerson served as the pastor of the historic Old North Church (Second Unitarian) in Boston, but left after only three and one-half years. In an introduction to Emerson's essays, literary critic Edward Ericson sums up Emerson's philosophy of religion: "His Transcendentalist philosophy was a religion of the spiritually emancipated mind and heart, unbounded by church or party." Emerson came to believe that human beings had inherent wisdom in their souls and that worship should not be constrained to church or religious convention. His religious ideas were also deeply rooted in American democracy.

After leaving his appointment as a pastor, Emerson traveled widely in Europe. He was influenced by European philosophy, particularly the writings of Immanuel Kant, who challenged Locke's idea that wisdom was gained only through experience. Kant and the transcendentalists believed that wisdom was inherent in the soul of each human being. In 1836, Emerson became a founding member of the Hedge Club, later named the Transcendental Club by outsiders. Emerson biographer Robert D. Richardson, Jr., explains: "The club was a forum for new ideas, a clearinghouse, full of yeast and ferment, informal, open-ended, far from the usual exclusive social clique conveyed by the word 'club.'" The formation of this club in 1836 in many ways marks the beginning of the transcendentalist movement. Later that same year Emerson wrote his seminal essay *Nature*. This was followed in 1837 by the essay "The American Scholar," which was actually a commencement address at Harvard.

Emerson continued to write and travel to Europe long after the transcendentalist movement ended. He greatly influenced many writers, including one of his most famous disciples, Thoreau. Emerson died April 27, 1882, in Concord, Massachusetts.

Margaret Fuller (1810-1850)

Born May 23, 1810, in Cambridgeport, Massachusetts, Sarah Margaret Fuller was both an influential figure in Transcendentalism and an early feminist years ahead of her time in terms of her vision of a woman's place in society. Fuller wrote extensively about gender issues, incorporating Emersonian principles of self-reliance into her essays on women's struggles for social, economic, and intellectual equality. Educated in the classics by her father, Fuller developed a keen intellect from an early age. Unlike her male contemporaries Emerson and Thoreau, Fuller was not able to attend Harvard. (Women were not allowed.) Instead, Fuller faced the social reality of having to support herself. She taught for several years, including a stint at fellow transcendentalist Alcott's experimental, coeducational Temple School. However, Fuller did not think of herself as

a transcendentalist until she became good friends with Emerson and joined the Transcendental Club.

Fuller is perhaps best known for her groundbreaking book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, published in 1845. She was very much a radical of her time for her assertions about women. In an introduction to *The Portable Margaret Fuller*, critic Mary Kelley writes:

> During a century in which America divided the world
> on the basis of gender and made marriage and motherhood
> a female's sole occupation, Fuller insisted that
> women be able to develop their potential, not only as
> wives and mothers whose lives were defined by domesticity,
> but as individuals, each of whom had particular
> inclinations, desires and talents.

Fuller's writings were embraced by female activists and suffragists of the day and helped propel the women's rights movement forward, acting as a major influence for such events as the first women's rights conference in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York. Within the literary world, Fuller was also a major voice. She edited the transcendentalist publication *The Dial* for two years before turning it over to Emerson, at which time she became a columnist and correspondent for the *New York Daily Tribune*. She traveled extensively in Europe, meeting such literary greats as George Sand, William Wordsworth, and Elizabeth and Robert Browning. Fuller was only forty years old when she died on July 19, 1850, in a shipwreck during a hurricane off the coast of Fire Island near New York. She was returning to America from Italy with her husband and two-year-old son.

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

Henry David Thoreau was born July 12, 1817, in Concord, Massachusetts. He spent most of his life in Concord, dying there on May 6, 1862, at only forty-four years of age. Though Thoreau had only two books published in his lifetime, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) and *Walden* (1854), his influence was far-reaching, even into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A follower of Emerson, Thoreau graduated from Harvard University in 1837. A prolific journal writer, Thoreau wrote daily about his observations of the natural world. In fact, Thoreau is often considered one of America's great environmentalists. Like Emerson, he believed nature to be divine. He took Emerson's principles of self-reliance and put them into practice when, in 1845, he moved to Walden Pond (on Emerson's property) to live the rustic, simple life.

Thoreau stayed at Walden for two years and wrote the book *Walden* in 1854, after the transcendentalist movement had lost its steam in literary circles. Thoreau took Emerson's philosophy of nature as divine a step further; he believed that nature was infused with wildness, and he saw in nature the roots for his concept of "civil disobedience"□about which he wrote the essay "Resistance to Civil Government" (this

essay is often called "Civil Disobedience") in 1849. Like other transcendentalist writers, Thoreau was a champion of American democracy, but he also grew frustrated by what he saw as the modern world's way of alienating people from nature. He was guided by his moral principles, which had political implications as well. In an essay introducing Thoreau in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, critic Wendell P. Glick summarizes:

> Thoreau's 'Transcendental' premises led him to take a negative view of the dominant values of pre-Civil-War-America. He wrote disparagingly of the destruction to the natural environment . . . he deplored the implications of the rise of industrialism . . . he condemned the institution of black slavery.

Thoreau's writings on civil disobedience continue to be widely read long after their original publication and are known to have directly influenced such civil rights leaders as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

Poet Walt Whitman was born May 13, 1819, in West Hills, New York. Unlike the other writers involved in the transcendentalist movement, Whitman was not a New Englander. He lived most of his life in and around New York City, a city that greatly impacted his writing and view of humanity. Before writing the work he is best known for, *Leaves of Grass*, he worked as a schoolteacher and journalist, writing for several of the New York newspapers.

Whitman did not begin as a transcendentalist, nor was the free-spirited free verse with which he was associated always his style. His writing style developed along with his political sense, and as the country became more and more divided with the approaching Civil War, Whitman used his poetry to extol democracy and American populism. In his introduction to *Walt Whitman: A Historical Guide*, nineteenth-century literary scholar David S. Reynolds explains:

> By the mid-1850s, [he] had become capable of writing all-encompassing poetry as a gesture of healing and togetherness to a nation he felt was on the verge of collapse. He had a messianic vision of his poems, as though by reading them, America would be magically healed.

With his poetry, Whitman also made a conscious decision to cast off the conventions of Victorian literature and society. In the volume *Leaves of Grass*, his language is openly sexual in places. It is reported that after Emerson and Whitman became friends, Emerson asked Whitman to tone down the sexuality in his poetry. Whitman, however, refused. He believed that the essence of humankind was wild and that sexuality was

part of that essence and part of the soul. Though Whitman was opposed to slavery, he was not strong in the abolitionist movement. He did, however, love and admire Abraham Lincoln, and in 1865 he wrote the oft-recited poem "O Captain! My Captain!" after Lincoln was assassinated. At times, Whitman was on the periphery of the transcendentalist movement, and at other times he was very closely associated with it. Emerson and Thoreau were great admirers of his poetry. Whitman died on March 26, 1892, in Camden, New Jersey.

Representative Works

The Blithedale Romance

Hawthorne's novel *The Blithedale Romance*, published in 1852, came on the heels of the transcendentalist movement. A key American author, Hawthorne was on the periphery of Transcendentalism, but his work was informed by transcendentalist ideals, and he is often grouped with transcendentalist writers. *The Blithedale Romance* is key to the transcendentalist movement in that it depicts□loosely perhaps□the story of Brook Farm, an experimental socialist community populated by various transcendentalist thinkers and writers. Hawthorne lived only briefly at Brook Farm, but he came away disillusioned. *The Blithedale Romance* fictionalizes his experiences there, embodied in characters such as intellectual feminist Xenobia (thought to represent Fuller), philanthropist Hollingsworth, and Miles Coverdale (the narrator). Coverdale explains:

> It was our purpose . . . to give up whatever we had heretofore attained, for the sake of showing mankind the example of a life governed by other than the false and cruel principles, on which human society has all along been based.

By the end of the novel, however, the Blithedale experiment has failed because of betrayals and complications, and Xenobia ends up drowning (as Fuller drowned in a shipwreck). Critics at the time debated how accurate Hawthorne intended his fictionalized account to be and whether or not Coverdale was his stand-in; they also debated, and continue to debate, Hawthorne's judgement of socialism □whether or not he felt it to be a viable alternative to the growing industrialism and poverty of the nineteenth century.

Leaves of Grass

When Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1855, it was unlike any collection of poems published by an American poet in the history of the nation. Characterized by long, twisting sentences combined in a free, liberated poetic form, the poems of *Leaves of Grass* were bold statements about love, desire, nature, and poetics. Though Whitman might be considered less of a central figure in the transcendentalist movement than, say, Emerson, there is no doubt that *Leaves of Grass* was inspired by, and indeed born out of, the transcendentalist movement. In these poems, Whitman offers a celebration of nature and of the soul and the soul's innate connection to God through nature. The title *Leaves of Grass* belies the central metaphor of the collection: that something as small as a single blade of grass contains the divinity of God and at the same time is a small part of the world at large.

In poems such as "Song of Myself" and "I Sing the Body Electric," Whitman pushes the envelope of Transcendentalism in his discussion of the body and sexuality. In "Song of Myself," he proclaims, "I am the poet of the Body, / and I am the poet of the soul." "I Sing the Body Electric" begins with the bold statement, "The armies of those I love engirth me, and I engirth them." Whitman's language is very physical, even sexually explicit in places, expressing both heterosexual and homosexual desire. Critic M. Jimmie Killingsworth in his essay "Whitman and the Gay American Ethos," explains:

> The centrality of sex in *Leaves of Grass* and Whitman's experimentation in language, above all his free verse . . . and his audacity in exploring metaphors and other tropes, earned him the contempt of many reviewers in his own time but also made him a hero among less conventional contemporaries and among later critics.

Emerson and Thoreau were fans of Whitman, as was the circle of radical social reformers and freethinkers with whom he involved himself. A poetic pioneer, Whitman inspired many modern poets, especially in the 1960s during the time of social protest and political reform.

Nature

Nature, by Emerson, lays out the fundamental ideas of the transcendentalist movement in America. Published in 1836, *Nature* came at the beginning of the movement, sparking a literary outpouring over the next decade by various transcendentalist authors. The work is, as its title suggests, a study of nature and humanity's relationship to nature. Part philosophical treatise, part prose poem, *Nature* attempts to outline the pathway to spiritual enlightenment, which begins with not only the praise and appreciation of nature but also the belief that it is divine.

Emerson opens this essay with a call to develop an American intellectual tradition□something about which he was very passionate. He says:

> The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. . . .Why should we not have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?

While Emerson and his fellow transcendentalists were very much influenced by British Romanticism and German philosophy, they were espousing a new kind of thinking, which they saw as distinctly American. They wanted to break free from any traditions that put up barriers between humans and God. Emerson preached a religion of democracy and connectedness, in which every human has equal access to spiritual enlightenment. He writes:

Standing on the bare ground,□my head bathed by
the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,□all
mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball;
I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal
Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.

Many critics have read the image of the transparent eyeball as a key symbol for Transcendentalism in that Transcendentalism is about the ability to see the divine and to "transcend" the soul. Nature is very much an active character in this essay. Emerson breathes life into such intangible concepts as reason, understanding, love, truth and freedom, naming them as if they were characters in a play. He interacts with them and tries to delineate the relationship between them. *Nature* is an intense read, but the transcendentalist movement itself was intense, dealing with lofty ideals and philosophical meanders. Soon after it was published, *Nature* became a cornerstone of the movement.

Walden

Thoreau's *Walden*, published in 1854, is one of the most cherished pieces of American literature. Though published after the height of Transcendentalism, *Walden* was written during the twenty-six-month period when Thoreau lived at Walden Pond. A detailed record of Thoreau's life there, *Walden* takes Emerson's philosophy of selfreliance and puts it into practice.

While living at Walden, Thoreau built his own cabin from trees he lumbered himself, farmed and grew his own food, and generally lived a life of self-sufficiency. In addition to providing a detailed log of his expenses and budget for his time at Walden, he writes at great length in the first chapter, "Economy," about the state of labor in America. Thoreau recognized that industrialization had a grip on the country and that people's labor was being exploited to feed the system. His answer was deliberate living, and *Walden* can be read as a manual for this type of living. Thoreau explains his reasons for his Walden experiment in the oftquoted and treasured lines:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately,
to front only the essential facts of life, and see if
I could not learn what it had to teach, and not,
when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

This type of simple, poetic style characterizes much of *Walden*. Like Emerson's *Naure*, *Walden* is very much a document in celebration of nature and the spiritual answers nature provides. If *Nature* outlines the theory of such living, then *Walden* puts it into practice. This is one of the reasons why *Walden* has endured and sounds fresh even to modern readers.

Woman in the Nineteenth Century

Published in 1845, Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* is a political and philosophical treatise that gives voice to women in history and envisions a new way of conceiving of women's place within society. It is an essay that, according to literary critic Mary Kelley, proposed "an alternative system of gender relations." Fuller wrote *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* during a time in history when women could not yet vote, file for divorce, or be taken seriously if they entered the public sphere to earn a living alongside men. She was keenly aware of women's lack of economic and political power and aligned herself with the suffragists of the day, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, to secure the vote for women.

Woman in the Nineteenth Century is certainly politically charged. It is also a philosophical rethinking of gender relations. Fuller writes:

> We would have every path laid open to Woman as freely as to Man. Were this done . . . we should see crystallizations more pure and of more various beauty. We believe the divine energy would pervade nature to a degree unknown in the history of former ages, and . . . a ravishing harmony of the spheres would ensue.

In this essay, Fuller advocates harmony and balance between the public and private, the marketplace and the household, instead of strict separation. Fuller's argument is filled with literary and classical allusions; she was writing to an educated audience, very much trying to appeal to the readership of works such as Emerson's *Nature*. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* was received very positively among transcendentalists and women's rights advocates and is most certainly a pillar of first-wave feminism.

Critical Overview

Critically speaking, Transcendentalism was not exactly a cohesive movement. In other words, it was a collection of varied ideas and aims that existed among various thinkers, writers, and philosophers. Emerson biographer Richardson says:

> Whatever Transcendentalism was, it was not suited to institutionalizing. It gave birth to no academy; it flourished in no college or seminary. It had two collective expressions during its heyday (the club and the magazine called *The Dial*) but could only manage one at a time.

Emerson is regarded as the center of the movement, but he encouraged his followers to think for themselves. While the movement may not have been a cohesive whole, it was very influential for several American writers.

Critics have responded in varied ways to transcendentalist works. Perhaps Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* garnered the strongest responses. Critic Reynolds points out that while there were more positive than negative views of Whitman's poetry collection, the negative views were very strong:

> Some vigorously denounced its sexual explicitness and its egotistical tone. One reviewer blasted the volume as a "mass of filth," and another insisted that its author must be "some escaped lunatic raving in pitiable delusion."

Fuller's critics could also be harsh. She faced the dual challenge of being a woman and writing about controversial issues. Fuller scholar Donna Dickenson explains, "The best of Fuller's female defenders lacked all conviction, while the worst of her attackers□male and female alike□were full of passionate intensity."

It is not unusual that radical ideas would not be well received by the keepers of culture□the role that critics tend to play. Texts such as *Walden*, which did not seem as overtly radical as *Leaves of Grass*, tended to receive rave reviews.

Twenty-first-century literary critics are still writing about transcendentalist works and see continuing transcendentalist influence in modern literature.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Ketteler has taught literature and composition. In this essay, Ketteler discusses the political dimension of the transcendentalist movement, particularly the way transcendentalist writers address race and gender issues.

The literary, philosophical, and religious movement known as Transcendentalism sprung up in America in the mid-1830s, during a time when the country was headed towards a major political crisis. Transcendentalism is as much a literary movement as it is a political one, and some of the key players□Emerson, Fuller, Thoreau, and Whitman □interwove politics into their intellectual musings. To speak of race, gender, or class□issues which revolve around power relations or unequal distribution of power□as all of these writers did, is a political move. To say these writers were "liberals" by twenty-first century standards is not quite right; however, they were all ahead of their time in their ideas about liberation and equality for all people.

Perhaps the biggest divide in the early to midnineteenth century was the issue of slavery. An economic, social, and political issue, slavery was divisive from the very beginning. Slavery was never supposed to last. Scholar Paul Lauter explains in his introduction to early nineteenth-century literature in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*: "The Founders had mainly assumed that slavery would in the course of time atrophy and that slaveholders, Constitutionally prevented from importing additional slaves, would ultimately turn to other, free sources of labor." But the invention of the cotton gin changed this way of thinking, reinforcing the institution of slavery and making the use of slaves to pick cotton highly lucrative. The tension mounted in America as several court cases and compromises came into being: the Missouri Compromise in 1820, which prohibited slavery in the new territories; the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, which made it legal for slave catchers to come to the North to reclaim escaped slaves; and the Dred Scott decision in 1857, which held that African Americans were not citizens of the United States and that slaveholding could not be excluded from any state or territory. At the same time there were slave revolts led by Nat Turner (1831) and John Brown (1859), as well as a huge abolitionist network of writers, activists, and Underground Railroad conductors. Slavery was on the minds of Americans, and the writers of the day were certainly not exempt.

So why, then, would a small, highly educated and liberal group of New England writers, philosophers, and ministers choose to turn to nature in this time of impending crisis? Transcendentalism represented a turning inward in many aspects; it focused on the individual, on the human spirit and the human soul. For Emerson, nature was divine; it contained the answers to all the mysteries of life. Everyone had access to nature, yet few could really grasp the divine potential of it. He says in *Nature*:

> To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. . . . At least they have a very superficial seeing. . . . The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has

retained the spirit of his infancy even into the era of manhood.

This passage suggests that to really "see" nature, one must think with the imagination of a child. Emerson and his fellow transcendentalists, especially educator Alcott, believed that children saw the world with fresher eyes and that since they were closer to birth, they were closer to their prebirth spiritual state. Children are not full participants in the capitalist system because they are not yet driven by money; their minds are less "crowded" with worries of the modern world.

In this way, Transcendentalism advocates an almost regressive state. If one of the tenets of Transcendentalism is to see with the eyes of a child, another tenet is the quest for individualism. Emerson and Thoreau were very much proponents of American individualism; they eschewed conformity and convention. This forms the basis for Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance." In this essay, he explains:

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a jointstock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion.

The idea of self-reliance sets up an interesting paradox. The "joint-stock company" Emerson speaks of represents the backbone of American capitalism. No longer was America a nation of farmers; it was instead a nation of industry, of mills, factories, and stockholders. What does it mean then to be an individual? As an individual, can one still believe in the American system of capitalism? And how does one understand self-reliance in relation to slavery?

Thoreau has an answer for Emerson in his essay "Resistance to Civil Government". (The essay is often called "Civil Disobedience".) The philosophy of Transcendentalism and the institution of slavery are diametrically opposed. Transcendentalism is about liberation; slavery is about bondage. Transcendentalism is about rising above commodity and the commodification of nature; slavery is about buying and selling humans as commodities. Transcendentalism is about democracy; slavery is fundamentally antidemocratic. For Thoreau, to espouse an abolitionist philosophy in theory was not enough; he advocated action. He explains in "Resistance to Civil Government":

I do not hesitate to say those that call themselves Abolitionists should at once effectually withdraw their support, both in person and property, from the government of Massachusetts, and not wait till they constitute a majority of one, before they suffer the right to prevail through them.

If the government is perpetrating crimes against humanity, as Thoreau thought slavery to be, then citizens have the right, the duty even, to disobey the laws that support such crimes. In Thoreau's case, he refused to pay a poll tax supporting the Mexican War (which he saw as an effort to extend slavery) and consequently spent a night in jail.

Like Thoreau and Emerson, Fuller actively opposed slavery. In addition to speaking out against slavery, she also spoke out against the subjugation of women, seeing this as another kind of slavery. She does not argue against marriage, she argues against a strict separation of the public and private spheres, envisioning marriage as a fruitful and intellectual partnership. Her view of gender is one of harmony and sharing, as described in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*:

Male and female represent the two sides of the great
radical dualism. But, in fact, they are perpetually
passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid
rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man,
no purely feminine woman.

Fuller's theory of mutual dependence also applies to race relations. Instead of the strict separation of the public and private spheres, the institution of slavery was based on the strict separation of black and white. It was very important to be able to define who was black and who was white, because otherwise the system would crumble. Miscegenation, or the mixing of the races, was considered a crime in the South, yet white masters repeatedly raped their black female slaves, creating offspring whom they then disowned and immediately sold into slavery. The fluidity of transcendentalist thought was in itself a challenge to the rigid views of race and gender held by many Americans in the early to middle nineteenth century.

If fluidity was a challenge to the conventional thinking of the day, then poet Whitman was certainly radical. His free-verse poetry was not only radical in its form□breaking free from traditional rhyme schemes and poetic rhythms□but its content was groundbreaking as well. Whitman's poetry represented a fundamental challenge to Victorian notions of gender. In *Leaves of Grass*, he asks, "What is a man, anyhow? What am I? What are you? / All I mark as my own, you shall offset it with your own / Else it were time lost listening to me." He continues to question notions of American identity, particularly white American identity, in the poem "I Sing the Body Electric." In this poem, Whitman imagines a slave on the auction block, and asks:

How do you know who shall come from the offspring
of his offspring through the centuries?
Who might you find you have come from yourself
if you could trace back through the centuries?

In a way, Whitman is echoing Emerson. In nature, all is fluid. The systems of power humans build around natural distinctions, such as race or gender, are all, in fact, unnatural and easily challenged.

Transcendentalism did represent a challenge to American thought. It might seem almost anti-political in the way it advocates a turning inward to examine the self. But for the transcendentalist writers, this inner examination represented a pathway to liberation, both personal liberation and political liberation. Before the Civil War, American democracy held a fundamental contradiction within itself. The ideals about equality set forth in the Declaration of Independence were not yet realized. Transcendentalists were strong supporters of American democracy, and in pointing out the flaws and contradictions, they helped to shape American intellectual and literary thought.

Source: Judi Ketteler, Critical Essay on Transcendentalism, in *Literary Movements for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Koster examines the effect the transcendental movement had on American culture and on writers outside its milieu well after its heyday.

No one can say with assurance just when the Transcendental Movement, that began with the publication of Emerson's *Nature* and the founding of the Transcendental Club in 1836, reached its high-water mark and started to ebb. The years of greatest excitement appear, however, to extend from 1836 through about 1843. By the latter date the meetings of the Club had ceased, Brook Farm came to the end of its purely Transcendental phase and began its transition to Fourierist Phalanx, Alcott's Fruitlands began and ended, *The Dial* was straining to continue publication, Brownson was on the verge of his conversion to Roman Catholicism, and other advocates of the movement were increasingly devoting themselves to particular reform causes such as Abolition and women's rights or to their own private ends. We may recall that Parker strove to rekindle the old enthusiasm in 1853 by calling for renewed meetings of the Transcendental Club but that his call went unanswered.

Although the movement as such may have been of relatively short duration, its influence has continued to be felt in a variety of ways down to the present day. And two of its three greatest literary statements□*Walden* and *Leaves of Grass*□ were published after the crest, in 1854 and 1855 respectively.

In the present chapter we shall examine first the influence of Transcendentalism as it affected certain aspects of American civilization in the second half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. Then we shall look at its impact on particular American writers of distinction other than such widely recognized Transcendentalists as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. For, as Simon and Parsons have remarked, "A movement [Transcendental Movement] that resisted definition at the start has been pervasive enough to have influenced subsequent movements as disjunct as Naturalism and Neo-Humanism and to have affected writers as opposed in their loyalties as Irving Babbitt and Eugene O'Neill."

There was, of course, a body of men who quite consciously thought of themselves as Transcendentalists and who tried to carry on the ideals and ideas of the earlier generation into post Civil War America. Samuel Johnson, John Weiss, Samuel Longfellow, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, David A. Wasson, Moncure Conway, Octavius B. Frothingham □these were among the best known. Worthy as they were, they seemed to lack the spark of those who had generated the movement. And some of the ancient sages lingered on, creating in Concord itself what Brooks has referred to as an "afterglow of Transcendentalism." For example, there was the Concord School of Philosophy that Alcott and William T. Harris of the St. Louis Hegelians founded in 1879 to combat the materialistic trend of scientific thinking. For nine summers young students, mostly from the West, where Alcott had indefatigably lectured, flocked there to take the courses on Emerson, Plato, Dante, Goethe, or Oriental religions, and to listen

to William James lecture on psychology or Harrison Blake read from his friend Thoreau's unpublished journals.

Of far wider-ranging importance, however, was the gathering movement of mind cure through the power of positive thinking that resulted in such phenomena as New Thought and Christian Science. Phineas Parkhurst Quimby pioneered both in his search for a way to cure the sick. Born a year before Emerson, he came to manhood as the Transcendental Movement was just beginning to stir. No intellectual, he was nonetheless plainly touched by the basic idea of the movement, for he came to consider himself as an agent "revealing that the power of curing was the divine wisdom in all of us accessible through intuition."

Quimby died in 1866, and following his death a split in the religious faith-healing movement occurred, with Mary Baker Eddy establishing the Christian Science Church and Warren F. Evans, a Swedenborgian minister, combining New Thought with the Hegelian idea that thought is the greatest creative force in the world.

Huber distinguishes Christian Science from New Thought thus:

> Christian Science is closely organized and rigidly centralized with a unified doctrine and an absolute discipline over its practitioners. In matters of faith, the absolute idealism of Christian Science denies the existence of matter and the reality of suffering. The New Thought movement consists of independent sects loosely organized . . . and centering authority in no book or person . . . it does not deny the existence of sickness, sin and poverty, but asserts that these evils can be overcome by right thinking.

Donald Meyer opines that "mind cure conventionalized lyric transcendentalism into a prosy pragmatism. . ." Indeed, the mind cure theologists made the inevitable connection with Emerson and the Transcendentalists. With no real philosophers among them, they had a tendency to plunder Emerson's works in particular for those ideas that fitted nicely into their theories of health, wealth, and power through mind, which is God. It was doubtless the metaphysics of practical idealism that they taught which fascinated William James, who saw that "the heart of mind cure was its psychology, and the heart of that psychology was its displacement of consciousness. Consciousness could not be trusted." In developing his theory of the subconscious and its importance to human behavior, James seems to have credited it with almost magical powers that needed only to be obeyed. As Meyer remarks, "Much of his description of the subconscious amounted to no more than a new label for the famous faculty of transcendental reason or intuition celebrated in New England sixty years earlier." Meyer goes on to point out that in its poetic-philosophic form the transcendental idea of intuition was not acceptable to scientific psychologists, but that essentially the same idea wearing the cloak of the "subconscious" was acceptable because it appeared to be more open to study and explanation. Nonetheless it was characterized by traits associated with the religious

faculty, traits that facilitated the individual's spiritual experience most directly in its best and fullest form.

The connection between Emerson's doctrines and the new mind-cure religion quite plainly existed, even though it might be somewhat tenuous. After all, Transcendental doctrine seemed to deny the reality of matter and stressed the power of mind. And Emerson had contended that sickness should not be named; for it was a kind of evil which, being negative, could scarcely be said to exist. Robert Peel has shown the warm reception accorded Mary Baker Glover Eddy's *Science and Health* in 1876 on its publication, and surely her refusal to accept disease, pain, old age, and death as realities, because such notions are applicable to matter rather than to spirit, which is the true reality, suggest at least a dim reflection of Emersonian attitudes. That Mrs. Eddy's ideas attracted at least some of the Transcendentalists is shown, for example, by Alcott's active interest in her book, which led him to visit her classes in Lynn and lecture to them. What made her new church particularly attractive to many members of the upper middle class was its tight discipline and its apparent rejection of New Thought's religious pragmatism that "guaranteed sick people health, poor people riches, and troubled people happiness." Unlike New Thought it did not embrace the "success" idea.

It is, of course, not only through religious or mental healing movements that American Transcendentalism has continued to exert an influence in the United States, and in other parts of the world as well. Carpenter, for example, has suggested that its influence in India, through Gandhi's extensive reading of Emerson and Thoreau, is considerable. He has also produced evidence of the practical impact of their thought on the leaders of modern India. And Lyons has advanced the view that the Austrian educator and social philosopher Rudolf Steiner and his Waldorf Schools□of which there are eight in the United States and some eighty in seventeen countries□show an affinity with Alcott's experiments in education and also with the basic ideals of Transcendentalism. For Steiner's Anthroposophy was to be "a way of knowledge that would lead the spiritual in man to the spiritual in the universe."

In the United States the New Humanism of the scholars Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More was at least partly traceable to the Transcendental influence. Babbitt's studies of Indian philosophy would have been unlikely without the initial inspiration of the Orientalism of the American Transcendentalists, including Emerson, of whom Babbitt was, according to René Wellek, at times a conscious disciple. He disapproved, however, of Emerson's undue optimism and of the romantic enterprise of reconciling man and nature. Nevertheless he felt the need of the "pure supernatural light" that he saw in Transcendentalism.

In the first half of the present century the influence of Transcendentalism in America, with the exception of its effect on a number of writers whom we shall discuss shortly, appeared largely dissipated. With the almost total triumph of materialism in an increasingly mechanized society, the Transcendental ideals seemed to have no place. The cumulative experience of two World Wars, a Great Depression, a Korean war and a Southeast Asian war has, however, brought about a resurgence of those ideals from about 1950 to the present. In the 50s the emergence of the "Beat" protest was a first

straw in the wind. With its rebellion against the tyranny of possessions, of highly organized social structure, of the encroachments of the police state mentality, it was, despite the leftist radicalism of many of its members, an essentially apolitical movement, "a last-ditch stand for individualism and against conformity."

By the 1960s and early 1970s many young Americans whom Huber calls the New Romantics were engaged in a spontaneous movement of dissent from the success creed that had motivated their parents. Rebelling against the work ethic that had led the Puritans to embrace work rather than leisure in the name of God's will and that had led their parents to prefer work over leisure in behalf of the God of national security proclaimed by their government, they "turned their backs," in Huber's words, "on the American goals of mobility and crass achievement." Clad in the unisex uniform of blue jeans, they wore their hair long and smoked their marijuana joints short. Again to quote Huber, they "were social evolutionists engaged in a peaceful, non-political protest against the competitive ethic of success. Dropouts from the traditional values of steady work, competition, and status-seeking (with its anxieties), they proclaimed a life of meditation, cooperation, sensory gratification, and pleasure now."

Some of them involved themselves in "transcendental meditation" as taught by gurus oriental and occidental; many went to live in communes where cooperation and doing one's own thing went hand in hand; and all were concerned about what they viewed as the rapidly deteriorating quality of life in America. In these ways they were logical descendants of the Transcendentalists; however, they seemed largely to lack the urge to reform that was so much a part of the earlier movement. And they were, by and large, far less philosophically or intellectually inclined. But the Thoreauvian advice to simplify one's life and to live in harmony with nature rather than as nature's adversary appeared to be at the root of their concept.

Turning now to the influence of Transcendentalism on American writers, we shall observe that it has been fairly constant since the early days of the movement. Of course, it is more difficult to discern in some than in others, but it would be scarcely an exaggeration to say that few of our foremost literary figures have been untouched by it.

In the preceding chapter attention was paid to the criticism of Transcendentalism by Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville at a time when the movement was at or near its peak. Despite the predominantly adverse attitude that we examined there, each one of them may also be seen as reflective in one way or another of at least certain aspects of the Transcendentalist rationale.

Poe, for example, has been viewed by more than one astute critic as adopting the Transcendentalist position particularly in his *Eureka*, where he bridges the gap between truth and poetry (beauty) he had so frequently insisted on. Arnold Smithline sees him as advocating in this poem the intuitive over the rational approach:

> Thus we see that Poe's ideas in *Eureka* are very close indeed to Transcendentalism. . . In his assertion of the unity of man and the cosmos, and of reliance upon

intuition as the best means of realizing that ultimate Truth, Poe is following the main tenets of the Transcendentalists. His final vision is not a descent into the maelstrom of nothingness but a positive assertion of man's divinity.

Conner agrees that *Eureka* has a transcendental conclusion although he does not see the entire work in that light. For Conner, Poe pushed his mechanistic attitude "to the conclusion that God is all, and in so doing pushed himself at least part way into the camp of the scorned transcendentalists." In like manner Conner views Longfellow as distrustful of all transcendentalism but accepting and molding some transcendental doctrines to his conservative Unitarian Christianity.

Marjorie Elder has devoted an entire volume to establishing with voluminous documentation Hawthorne's debt to the Transcendentalists' aesthetic theories, which she also sees as influencing many other critics of Transcendentalism, such as Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes, and Melville. Tellingly, she quotes Longfellow: "The highest exercise of imagination is not to devise what has no existence, but rather to perceive what really exists, though unseen by the outward eye,□not creation, but insight." Here he is surely at one with Emerson.

Hawthorne speaks specifically in such works as "The Hall of Fantasy," "The Old Manse," and the preface to "Rappaccini's Daughter" of the influence of the Transcendentalist aesthetic theories as carefully formulated and written by Emerson. Indeed Elder believes that "Hawthorne, like Emerson, saw Reality shadowed in the Actual; the Perfect in the Imperfect□in Nature and Man. Hawthorne's Artist, like Emerson's, was the last best touch of the Creator, enabled by Faith, Intuition, the pursuit of Beauty and by Nature's revelations to him to create an image of the Ideal." In fact she sees Hawthorne as carrying out the Transcendentalist aesthetic by mingling the Actual and the Imaginative throughout his tales. He is, she holds, using Transcendental symbolism by doing so in his assertion of Truth as well as by arranging scenes in correspondence with Nature. In like manner, she believes that "Melville's symbolic method of striking through the mask was thoroughly Transcendental."

That Melville was opposed to Emersonian Transcendentalism as a philosophy we have already remarked, but that there are echoes of that philosophy too numerous to mention in such books as *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick* the most casual reader may discern. Indeed in his last work, *Billy Budd*, written long after the movement was at its height, Melville seems to accept an essential tenet of the Transcendentalists, and most certainly of Emerson, namely, that society everywhere is conspiring against the manhood of its members. For Captain Vere, who condemns the Christ-like Billy, is the very symbol of that conformity that makes of the human being not a man but a uniformed robot. Vere's tragedy is that he is sensitive enough to know it.

Even the "Genteel Poets" of the latter part of the nineteenth century were touched by the Transcendental concepts. As Conner has shown, the broker-poet E.C. Stedman in *Nature and Elements* and in such a poem as "Fin de Siècle" displays his interpretation

of the divine immanence as the private soul universalized, a distinctly Transcendental concept. And Richard Watson Gilder thought of the material universe after the Transcendental fashion as simply an expression or manifestation of God! "His God both was and was not the universe, was transcendent as well as immanent."

As for the greatest American poet of the latter half of the nineteenth century other than Whitman, Dickinson, there is ample evidence that she absorbed Transcendental ideas as well as the Emersonian spirit and thus became, in the words of Clark Griffith, a "post-Emersonian, or, still more accurately perhaps, a sort of Emersonian-in-reverse."

Such poems as 632, "The Brain is Wider than the Sky," composed perhaps in 1862, and 1510, "How happy is the little Stone," written perhaps in 1881, suggest quite clearly the Transcendental inspiration. The first, stating the unlimited measurements of the human mind□"wider than the sky," "deeper than the sea," and "just the weight of God"□implies the divinity of man and his identification with the universal being, a fundamental Transcendental tenet. And the second, about the happy little stone "That rambles in the Road alone," not concerned with fashioning a career or with fearsome exigencies, created by universal force to be "independent as the Sun," and "Fulfilling absolute Decree in casual simplicity" reflects the Transcendental ideals of individual freedom, closeness to nature, simplicity in living, and the divinely ordered universe.

Still other poems with a distinct Transcendental thrust are 501, "This World is not Conclusion"; 668, "'Nature' is what we see"; 669, "No Romance sold unto"; 1176, "We never know how high we are"; 1354, "The Heart is the Capital of the Mind"; and 1355, "The Mind lives on the Heart."

As Cambon has pointed out, Dickinson was, however, ambivalent in her transcendentalism, apparently feeling at times, as in 280, that she has no over-soul to rely on in her existential plight. The poem describes the funeral in her brain as she realizes her desperate isolation as an earthbound member of the human race. "And then a Plank in Reason [the Transcendentalist intuitive wisdom], broke, she says, letting her drop terrifyingly from world to world until, ambiguously, she "Finished knowing□then□" as the poem ends.

Even such a relatively sophisticated literary practitioner as William Dean Howells, author of almost forty novels, esteemed critic, and editor of such influential journals as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Harpers*, is seen to have a kinship with the New England Transcendentalists because of his Swedenborgian background, a kinship most marked during his period of Utopian social reform. It may be discerned in such novels as *The World of Chance* (1893) in which we meet an old socialist, David Hughes, who had once been a member of the Brook Farm community and who serves as Howells's spokesman in suggesting that society is not to be reformed by individuals who are simply interested in improving themselves, but by those who will work together to reconstruct its institutions. *A Traveller from Altruria* (1894) and its sequel, *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907), present Howells's social idealism by contrasting the growing inequities of American life and its laissez-faire economic system to his utopian view that

reiterates the Transcendental vision of the potential value of each man and the perfectibility of human society.

The Transcendental influence extends into the present century in the thought of such eminent poets as Frost and Stevens, such a dramatist as O'Neill, and such voices of the "Beat Generation" as those of Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder.

That Robert Frost had a lifelong interest in Emerson is attested not only by much of his poetry but also by his biographer, Lawrance Thompson. William Chamberlain in his essay "The Emersonianism of Robert Frost" sees it as "central to an understanding of the core of Frost's philosophy of poetry, the concept of a 'momentary stay against confusion.'" Chamberlain presents such poems as "West-Running Brook" and "Directive" as prime evidence. The former poem contains a conversation between husband and wife about the brook that runs west contrary to all the other country brooks that run east to reach the ocean. The husband explains toward the end of the poem:

It is this backward motion toward the source,
Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
the tribute of the current to the source.
It is from this in nature we are from.
It is most us.

This seeming identification of the human being's origin with a common natural source, a universal being, is thoroughly transcendental as is the somewhat more obscure admonition in "Directive" in which the poet directs us back to a hidden brook that once provided water for a farm house long gone and tells us to "drink and be whole again beyond confusion." Nor should we overlook the thoroughly Transcendental rejection of thoughtless adherence to tradition that forms the basis of one of Frost's bestknown poems, "Mending Wall."

Frost, brought up in a Swedenborgian household, was a self-proclaimed mystic who believed in symbols and who, through their use, suggests again and again in his poems the Emersonian, Thoreauvian requirement that man must establish a primary contact with nature in order to give any meaning to his life. It is scarcely surprising, then, to find him listing Emerson's *Essays* and *Poems* and Thoreau's *Walden* among the ten books he believed should be in every public library.

Although a transcendental influence may seem far from surprising in a "country" poet like Frost, its presence in a poet so urbane and sophisticated as Wallace Stevens may be unexpected. But, as Nina Baym has fully demonstrated, it is there in full measure. Contrary to the frequently expressed idea that Stevens rejected Transcendentalism, she finds that "line by line. . .his kinship manifests itself." Noting that the Transcendentalists, despite their insistence on a universal mind, recognized that each human being continued to apprehend, conceive, and perceive through his own mind, she observes that Stevens, however he may insist "that each man's perception is discrete and cannot be related back to an overarching unity, believes very strongly that the experience of

any one mind is common to all minds." Thus she finds in Stevens' poetry a modern version of Transcendentalism.

Baym further notes that Stevens' poetry may be interpreted as a modern attempt to articulate the Transcendental moment of ecstasy proclaimed so strikingly by Emerson. She finds, however, that it is Thoreau more than Emerson or any other Transcendentalist that Stevens resembles. The reason is their sharing of "an overwhelming love for landscape, which leads them both to dedicate themselves to nature in poetry with the same sort of novitiate intensity." Beyond sharing this love of nature, she sees Thoreau and Stevens formulating their principal emotions□joy and despair□in much the same way. Both are also seen as preoccupied with change as an immutable fact of the universe (perhaps the Platonic doctrine of flux?). "From 'Sunday Morning' on through all his works," she says, "Stevens asserted that although we *think* we love stability, in fact everything in the world that we love, and even love itself, originates from change. 'Death is the mother of beauty'. . . *Walden*, as much as 'Sunday Morning,' is an attempt to show the world enduring through change . . ."

Many examples can be found among Stevens' poems to illustrate his transcendental point of view. For example, in "The Planet on the Table" he writes of the poet:

His self and the sun were one
And his poems, although makings of his self,
Were no less makings of the sun.

Here we see the identification of the self with divinity (the Sun) and the Emersonian notion of poetry all existing in nature before time was.

In what is perhaps Stevens' most famous poem, "Sunday Morning," we observe the modern woman unable to devote herself to the conventional worship of dead gods. The poet asks

Why should she give her bounty to the dead?
What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?
Divinity must live within herself. . .

Here Stevens has brilliantly encapsulated three main tenets of Transcendentalist doctrine: that the God of the established churches is a dead, historical God who can no longer inspire faith; that religious ecstasy is to be found through contact with nature; and that the living God can be found only within the self. The poem further emphasizes Stevens' rejection of the sterile, changeless, conventionalized Heaven in favor of the everchanging beauties of the earthly here and now.

Or again, in such a poem as "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" we see the suggestion of the individual mind being one with a central mind (like the Transcendental over-soul) as part of a dimly divined order that we know through feeling or intuition. The final three stanzas say it best:

Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves,
We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous.

Within its vital boundary, in the mind.
We say God and the imagination are one. . .
How high that highest candle lights the dark.

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.

In American drama Eugene O'Neill, currently undergoing a great revival of interest, is the only significant playwright to have reflected something of the Transcendental attitude. As he once wrote to the drama critic George Jean Nathan, "The playwright of today must dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it□the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfactory new one for the surviving primitive, religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with." This is indeed what the Transcendentalists of a hundred years before had felt that they must do. The difference between them and an O'Neill lies in their belief that they had discovered a cure for the pervasive sickness.

O'Neill is seen by Carpenter as ambivalent in his feelings toward the Transcendentalists. Like him they had been "rebels against the materialism of their times, but their idealism had also been the product of a Yankee and Puritan society," a society that O'Neill scorned for its narrow hypocrisies (in, e.g., *Beyond the Horizon* and *Desire Under the Elms*). Emerson and Thoreau, says Carpenter, never scorned material things but sought go ameliorate the actual situation, and appealed to the future. O'Neill, on the other hand, had no belief in the future or any hope for it. Tragedy he considered essential to the nature of things. Thus, in a sense, Carpenter finds him even more transcendental than the optimistic Emerson.

"Historic Transcendentalism," Carpenter comments, "has, in fact, divided into two streams. The first has become active, scientific, and pragmatic. The second has become passive, mystical, and psychological. Emerson's thought flowed largely in the first stream, toward modern pragmatism. O'Neill's thought tended towards modern, nonrational psychology." Thus O'Neill's marked interest in, and use of, Freudian probings into the less accessible reaches of the human psyche as a means of comprehending the mysterious behavior of his fellow travelers on the planet Earth.

Turning to the more immediate scene, we find such poets as Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder carrying on, each in his own way, the tradition of Whitman and Thoreau. Ginsberg quite plainly accepts Whitman's concept of the poet as teacher, prophet, and seer. And he writes his verse in the same free and irregular lines, with a vocabulary geared to the colloquial diction of his own time and place. Although his view of America lacks the optimistic note of the author of *Leaves of Grass*, he shares the Transcendental will to protest against an established majority that is leveling the nation into a deadly mediocrity.

As Ginsberg was the Beat Generation's approximation of Whitman, so has Snyder been its latter-day version of Thoreau. Intensely interested, as was Thoreau, in the literature and philosophy of the Orient, he learned Chinese and Japanese and even lived for a time in a Buddhist monastery. And like Thoreau he has been intensely concerned with the physical environment of America. Nor can the preoccupation in his verse with the need to be free and on the move be overlooked, so much is it in the tradition of Thoreau.

In conclusion, it is impossible not to agree with Edwin Gittleman's view that "contrary to the commonplace assertion that the Civil War effectively destroyed the transcendental ambiance in America, the magical Circle of Concord has never really been broken. Rather, it has been expanded to where now it seems to touch (if not embrace) a perplexing demi-world consisting of Allen Ginsberg, the Beatles, S.D.S., Abbie Hoffman, sexual freedoms, Black Power, lysergic acid diethylamide, and miscellaneous esoterica and erotica." Even though Gay Wilson Allen may be right in remarking that the main difficulty for one today trying to teach the Transcendentalists is that their goal of a deeper spiritual life has become "an almost meaningless abstraction," his further observation that they were trying to find a more satisfying life here and now on this lovely earth is perhaps equally true of many of those mentioned in Gittleman's catalogue of the contemporary underground that cannot accept the values of the American establishment.

To close this book on American Transcendentalism without giving the last word to its foremost spokesman, Emerson, would seem almost an act of heresy. In his journal for 1841 he said of it, "That it has a necessary place in history is a fact not to be overlooked, not possibly to be prevented, and however discredited to the heedless & to the moderate & conservative persons by the foibles or inadequacy of those who partake the movement yet is it the pledge & the herald of all that is dear to the human heart, grand & inspiring to human faith."

Source: Donald N. Koster, "Influences of Transcendentalism on American Life and Literature," in *Transcendentalism in America*, Twayne Publishers, 1975, pp. 84-98.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Tanner explores the transcendentalist creed: using an "innocent" eye to "see God in all things."

A hostile American reviewer of Wordsworth noted that 'he tries to look on nature as if she had never been looked on before' and he bemoaned that fact that the poet seemed to be attracting an 'ever increasing school of devoted disciples' in America. Now, what he blames Wordsworth for accurately sums up the ambition of many of the Transcendentalists. There is no need here to disentangle the indigenous emotional drive from the imported European ideas in Transcendentalist thought. But it is important to stress how eager the Transcendentalists were to develop a new attitude towards nature, a new point of view. Picking up the Wordsworthian hint they developed it for their own purposes. Thus Parker echoes Wordsworth in describing the correct way to respond to the world. He is discussing terrestial beauty.

Now to many men, who have but once felt this; when
heaven lay about them, in their infancy, before the
world was too much with them, and they laid waste
their powers, getting and spending, when they look
back upon it across the dreary gulf, where Honor,
Virtue, Religion have made shipwreck and perished
with their youth, it seems visionary, a shadow,
dream-like, unreal. They count it a phantom of their
experience; the vision of a child's fancy, raw and unused
to the world. Now they are wiser. They cease
to believe in inspiration. They can only credit the saying
of the priests, that long ago there were inspired
men; but none now; that you and I must bow our
faces to the dust, groping like the Blind-worm and
the Beetle; nor turn our eyes to the broad, free heaven;
that we cannot walk by the great central and celestial
light that God made to guide all that come into
the world, but only by the farthing-candle of tradition.
. . Alas for us if this be all.

An awareness of the divine beauty of the world should not be made dependent on 'tradition', nor on any inherited and institutionalized modes of thought or belief. It would be apprehended directly by any one who could maintain the requisite reverence of attitude and recapture a personal conviction that the world was 'instinct with the Divine Spirit'. 'When this day comes, man will look on Nature with the same eye, as when in the Eden of primitive innocence and joy.' It was the privilege of unmediated admiration and response which the Transcendentalists were determined to secure for their age. It was for this reason they took issue with the Unitarians with their Lockean materialism and passionless contention that only through the biblical miracles was God revealed to man. Such an attitude seemed to impoverish the present world.

It is negative, cold, lifeless, and all advanced minds
among Unitarians are dissatisfied with it, and are
craving something higher, better, more living and
lifegiving. . . Society as it is, is a lie, a sham, a charnelhouse,
a valley of dry bones. O that the Spirit of
God would once more pass by, and say unto these
dry bones, 'Live!' So I felt, and so felt others.

Thus Orestes Brownson described the original thrust behind the movement. The Transcendentalists refused to see the world as 'a mute and dead mass of material forms': rather, it was 'a living image, speaking forth the glory of God'. At least, it was that if it was looked at properly. The eye which was 'purified of the notes of tradition' would see God in all things. Here. Now. That thralldom to old and cramping ways of thought, which inhibited and policed the individual response, would be broken. It was such a release from tradition that the Transcendentalists sought to achieve so that they might indulge a proper admiration for a present America neither subservient nor inferior to Europe. And the most forceful concept with which to challenge the traditional eye was clearly the innocent eye.

Innocent, the soul is quick with instincts of unerring
aim; then she knows by intuition what lapsed reason
defines by laborious inference; her appetites and affections
are direct and trustworthy. . . By reasoning
the soul strives to recover her lost intuitions; groping
amidst the obscure darkness of sense, by means
of the fingers of logic, for treasures present always
and available to the eye of conscience. Sinners must
needs reason: saints behold.

So Alcott summed up the extremity of his position. For him 'thought disintegrates and breaks' the unity of soul a child enjoys with the world. The prescribed cure was obvious: unlearn reason and behold the world with child-like passive admiration. The word recurred in much Transcendentalist writing. 'Wisdom does not inspect but behold' wrote Thoreau; while Emerson recommended for the 'habitual posture of the mind□beholding'. Saints behold, and so do children. The way back into a divine nature was through the innocent eye. Alcott himself was an educational experimenter of some audacity and he took his beliefs to their logical conclusion. He held conversations with children on the gospels and made their response a test of the validity of Christianity. 'If these *testimonies of children*, confirm the views of adults□that *Christianity is grounded in the essential Nature of Man*□than shall I add to its claim upon our faith.' It is hard to imagine Wordsworth making so literal an application of his poetic assertion that the child was a prophet and philosopher. There was much more interest in the child's point of view in America than in Europe at the time. It was revered to an unusual degree. Thus Miss Peabody, who worked in Alcott's experimental school, could observe:

It was very striking to see how much nearer the kingdom
of heaven . . . were the little children, than those

who had begun to pride themselves on knowing something. We could not but often remark to each other, how unworthy the name of knowledge was that superficial acquirement, which has nothing to do with self-knowledge; and how much more susceptible to the impressions of genius, as well as how much more apprehensive of general truths, were those who had not been hackneyed by a false education.

There is knowing and knowing. The knowledge which is a mere accumulation of data will tend to support the *tabula rasa* theories of the psychological sensationalists and make man the sport of matter. But the knowledge which seems to deliver itself as unharassed intuition, which seems to be the result of a generous impressionability and an out-reaching sense of spiritual qualities shared by perceiver and perceived, this knowledge will justify the Transcendentalists in their assertions. 'The mind must grow, not from external accretion, but from an internal principle', in the words of Sampson Reed. Given this emphasis on the 'internal principle', the process of true knowing, and the diminished concentration on the thing known, then clearly the child's mind can be expected to attract novel focus. The interest, that is to say, is in a cognitive stance, a stance of reverent response and assimilation. There is far less interest in the end results of analysis and prolonged inquiry, such as finished doctrine, intricate theology, or logical demonstration. For the Transcendentalists the central question was: how should a man look at the world to recover and retain a sense of its 'actual glory'? And for many of them the answer was□ behold it with wonder, like a child.

Just as the child was used as a positive image to set up against the claims of tradition, so the claims and rights of the uneducated vernacular type were pushed against the aristocratic hegemony of Europe over American thought. 'We are now the literary vassals of England, and continue to do homage to the mother country. Our literature is tame and servile, wanting in freshness, freedom, and originality. We write as Englishmen, not as Americans. . . Moreover, excellent as is the English literature, it is not exactly the literature for young republicans. England is tile most aristocratic country in the world.' Orestes Brownson continuously stressed the democratic implications of transcendentalist thought. He insisted that 'the light which shines out from God's throne, shines into the heart of every man'. The relevance of this for the writer was brought out by George Ripley: 'The most sublime contemplations of the philosopher can be translated into the language of the market.' So he instructs the American writer: 'He is never to stand aloof from the concerns of the people; he is never to view them in the pride of superior culture or station as belonging to a distinct order from himself.' Clearly a totally new perspective, disregardful of the past and the accumulated precedents of culture, was being sought and required. The call was for the point of view of the uninstructed: the eye of the child, the language of the market. The optimism involved in this idealization of the untutored need not be underlined. But there is one further implication of Transcendentalist thought which should be brought out. Many of the Transcendentalists were Unitarians who became dissatisfied with the mere observance of orthodox and seemly forms. They were more interested in sentiment than institutions and there was current enmity between them. So Brownson wrote: 'The sentiment now

breaks away from that form, which, if one may so speak, has become petrified.' Perhaps this attitude was most significantly dramatized by Emerson's resignation from the Unitarian ministry in 1832. 'I am not engaged to Christianity by decent forms' he explained later, 'what I revere and obey in it is its reality, its boundless charity, its deep interior life. . . Its institutions should be as flexible as the wants of man. That form from which the life and suitableness have departed should be as worthless in its eyes as the dead leaves that are falling around us.' I think one may take this as a more general apostasy from all formalism□in art as well as in religion. Because if all nature is good and the unmediated inner impulse of man reliable, then there is no need for life to be transmuted and reworked into art: art must rather emulate nature; flow with it, grow like it. Such an art□it is characteristic of much American writing□can display an almost unique breadth of hospitality, a spontaneous generosity of inclusion, a free-ranging wonder and compassionate attention which more than justify its daring neglect of accredited forms. For indeed there are forms which the instinct of health will cry out to scatter and demolish; forms which condone mental sloth, which perpetuate habitual responses, which flatter old complacencies, which smother all emerging novelty. But if we may adapt Emerson's words a little and say that the Transcendentalist felt that form could afford to be, indeed ought to be, as flexible as sentiment, then we could fairly point out that this might involve them in problems of organization. The vivifying enthusiasm and stimulus of the Transcendentalists provided the essential impetus for the development of a genuine American literature. But their own wellwarranted animus against forms has often, for subsequent writers, changed into the real and often arresting problem of how to assemble and contain their material. An excess of flexibility may well let everything in, but at the cost of not being able to hold very much together.

The Transcendentalists themselves could hold everything together by mystical generalizations. They disliked Unitarianism because 'it cannot pass from the Particular to the General'. Transcendentalism could do exactly this, with effortless confidence. But it should here be pointed out that the Transcendentalist, by relying so much for his poise and faith on fervent but vague feelings and generalizations, does expose himself to the risk of a shockingly abrupt disillusion, a very sudden sense of blighting deprivation, an impotent gloom which is the residue of an evaporated enthusiasm. And indeed the Transcendentalists at times revealed the precariousness of their position. Consider these two quotations from George Ripley.

> The creation in itself, without reference to the Almighty Spirit from which it sprung, is formless and without order□a mass of chaotic objects, of whose uses we are ignorant, and whose destiny we cannot imagine. It is only when its visible glory leads our minds to its unseen Author, and we regard it as a manifestation of Divine Wisdom, that we can truly comprehend its character and designs. To the eye of sense, what does the external creation present? Much less than we are generally apt to suppose. . . Merely the different arrangements of matter, the various degrees and directions in which the light falls on the

object admired, and the change of position with regard
to space. This is all that is seen. The rest is felt.
The forms are addressed to the eye, but the perception
of beauty is in the soul. And the highest degree
of this is perceived, when the outward creation suggests
the wisdom of the Creator. Without that, it is
comparatively blank and cold and lifeless.

Without that□everything depends on religious conviction. There are no compromise assurances, no working rules, no limited certainties, no veracities attainable by the senses alone. It is all or nothing. Again:

Without religion, we are buried in this world as in a
living tomb. Mystery□Darkness□Death□Despair
□these are the inscriptions which are born on the
portals of our gloomy prison-house. Doomed and unhappy
orphans, we know not whence we came, why
we are here, nor whither we go. . . All is blank, and
desolate, and lifeless, for to our darkened eye no God
is present there. And God, my friends, is necessary
to man.

Some of these images have a prophetic air. The lost child becomes a frequent figure in American literature, and images of confinement and imprisonment obtrude themselves in the works of writers as remote as Poe and Sherwood Anderson. The journey of which the path and destination are no longer sure becomes a common theme (it is in Melville and Mark Twain), and the material world as chaos instead of God's order is the insistent tenor of the work of Henry Adams. One could say that Pragmatism was a necessary solution to the dangerous extremism of response countenanced by Transcendentalist thought.

Perhaps the simplest definition of what Transcendentalism meant to those who embraced it is given by Ripley: 'It thirsts after the primitive, absolute, all pervading Truth. It is not contented with the knowledge of barren insulated facts.' They believed you could take a single discrete fact and infer from it some absolute truth: hence the continual shift from particularization to generalization in their writing. But take away that all-maintaining confidence in God, and man is left surrounded by 'barren insulated facts' with only the 'eye of sense' to help him. The Transcendentalists asserted that a man who could not see God everywhere was blind. The blind men of a later age duly had to return to a braille-like reading of the world.

No sentimentalist . . . no stander above men and
women or apart from them . . . no more modest than
immodest.

This was the character□as much persona as person□who tried to see what America was by looking around him as though for the first time. Effectively he brought a

continent to life. We have perhaps lost some of the sense of the audacity of that undertaking and yet his first poem makes a gesture which is in fact one of the perennial gestures of art: a gesture of passionate attention towards vast stretches of ignored reality. He is, as he confesses, not the explorer of life; neither is he the arranger, the describer, the analyser of life; nor is he the improver of life: he is 'the reminder of life' and the strange but persistently true thing is how often humanity needs such reminders, such reminding.

Source: Tony Tanner, "Saints Behold: The Transcendentalist Point of View," in *The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature*, Cambridge University Press, 1965, pp. 19-25.

Adaptations

Robert D. Richardson, author of *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, discusses his book and Emerson's life on CSPAN's *Booknotes* series. The interview aired August 13, 1995. For tape, transcript, or real-audio clip, visit http://www.booknotes .org.

Musician Ken Pederson produced a new-age CD entitled *Walden*, inspired by Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. Pederson produced it himself and released it in 1997.

Audio Partners Publishing Corporation released *Thoreau and Emerson: Nature and Spirit*, a double audiocassette, in 1997. The cassettes include passages from the authors' works relating to nature and spirituality.

The Spiritual Light of Ralph Waldo Emerson, a double audiocassette, was released in 1992 by Audio Literature. The work contains passages from Emerson's writings.

Voices and Visions: Walt Whitman, released by Winstar in 1999, is a VHS videocassette. It features poets of the twentieth century reading from Whitman's poems.

Originally produced for PBS in 1998, the VHS videocassette *Walt Whitman and the Civil War* is available from Monterey Video. It includes Whitman's poetry set against the backdrop of the Civil War.

Topics for Further Study

Write an essay discussing the ways in which American democracy played a role in transcendentalist thought. Explain why democracy was important to the transcendentalists.

Transcendentalism was a philosophical movement in many ways. Research the main differences between the theories of philosopher John Locke and the theories of philosopher Immanuel Kant, and write a speech discussing their philosophies and how Kant's ideas contributed to the transcendentalist ideals.

Transcendentalism was a regional movement, located mostly in Boston and Concord, Massachusetts. Research the history of New England at the time the transcendentalists were writing. Explain the ways in which transcendentalists reflect New England culture of the time. How did New England culture differ from culture in the South?

Compare and Contrast

Mid-Nineteenth Century: Black Americans are still held in slavery. Several laws are passed in relation to slavery, which escalate the debate in the United States. Abolitionists in the North actively fight against slavery, while escaped slaves write narratives chronicling their experiences. The nation ultimately goes to war over the issue, resulting in the emancipation of all slaves.

Today: Slavery has been abolished for almost 150 years in America, though African Americans face continuing discrimination and are still fighting for equal access to economic resources.

Mid-Nineteenth Century: The 1830s see the flowering of the American literary tradition. American literature has not been taken seriously abroad before this time. Emerson argues that America needs to develop an intellectual and philosophical tradition of its own in his essay "The American Scholar."

Today: American literature is a respected discipline in academia, and several authors have won Nobel prizes for their work. The American literary tradition is rich and varied today, including voices from many cultures representing various races, ethnicities, religions, social classes, and sexual orientations.

Mid-Nineteenth Century: America is seeing a wave of technological innovations. Railroads are being built, the steam engine is developed, the printing press is imporved□the world is changing. The country is making the transformation from a rural base to an urban one, with the population in cities rising rapidly and the population expanding westward.

Today: The pace of technology has not slowed down since the nineteenth century. The world is completely transformed in the twentieth century, with the development of the airplane, television, computer, and a whole host of other modern conveniences.

What Do I Read Next?

The nineteenth century offers a rich variety in literature, much of it influenced by transcendentalist writers. The novels of Melville, including what critics have regarded as his greatest, *Moby Dick*, originally published in 1851, provide an example of transcendentalist influence.

In poetry, Emily Dickinson is an interesting figure for study. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1997) contains all of her poems, which were originally published by Paul Johnson in a three-volume set in 1955. While Dickinson's short, concise lines stand in sharp contrast to Whitman's, she was greatly influenced by transcendentalist thought, particularly in her focus on nature and desire.

In terms of British Romanticism, reading the poetry of William Wordsworth can inform any understanding of American Transcendentalism, since the movements are intertwined. His *Poems in Two Volumes* was originally published in 1807.

Some of the best-selling "sentimental" novels of the day, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (first published serially in 1851 and 1852), provide a contrast to Transcendentalism in both style and content.

The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr. (1998), edited by Clayborne Carson, provides an opportunity to trace the trail of "civil disobedience" in America started by Thoreau.

Further Study

Bode, Carl, ed., *The Portable Thoreau*, The Viking Press, 1965.

This work includes *Walden*, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, eighteen poems, and several essays and journal entries. Bode presents Thoreau's work, as well as the controversies of Thoreau's life in this comprehensive collection.

Cameron, Kenneth Walter, *Young Emerson's Transcendental Vision: An Exposition of His World View with an Analysis of the Structure, Backgrounds and Meaning of "Nature,"* Transcendentalist Books, 1971.

This books provides a wealth of information about Transcendentalism and Emerson's relationship to it. It also includes a reprinting of works by authors relevant to Emerson's work, such as British romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Chai, Leon, *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance*, Cornell University Press, 1987.

This work discusses the influence of European Romanticism on the authors of the American Renaissance, including German and British writers and philosophers.

Myerson, Joel, *The New England Transcendentalists and "The Dial,"* Associated University Presses, 1980.

This book discusses the transcendentalist periodical *The Dial*, including information on the publication and reception of the periodical as well as a discussion of the Transcendental Club.

Rose, Anne, *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830-1850*, Yale University Press, 1981.

This work discusses the influence of Transcendentalism on the reform movements of the nineteenth century, including an in-depth historical background on the movement.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literary Movements for Students (LMfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LMfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LMfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LMfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LMfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LMfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LMfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literary Movements for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LMfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LMfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Literary Movements for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literary Movements for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from LMfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Literary Movements for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LMfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literary Movements for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of LMfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literary Movements for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LMfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literary Movements for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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