19th Century American Literature

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**Introduction to Transcendentalism**

1. Key Works
   1. Ralph Waldo Emerson
      1. “An American Scholar.” A rejection of “book learning”. He said what was important were original thinking and especially a new American idealism.
      2. “Self-Reliance.” “To believe in your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,-- that is genius.”
      3. “Nature.” An extremely important essay in which Emerson states that nature is a gateway to the spiritual world. The publication of this essay in 1836 marks the beginning of the transcendental movement.
      4. “Reason.” “When the eye of Reason opens […] outlines and surfaces become transparent and are no longer seen; causes and spirits are seen through them. The best moments of life are these delicious awakenings.”
      5. “The Over-soul.” Men and women are one with all things. The physical world that we live in is a symbolic representation of the spiritual world. By studying and having experiences in nature we can understand the best way to live our life.
   2. Henry David Thoreau
      1. Journals. Thoreau wrote in a journal every day of his adult life. In his journals he recorded his thoughts and his observations of nature.
      2. Poetry. Thoreau wrote many poems but most of them are lost. Emerson told Thoreau that his poetry was no good and so he burned most of it.
      3. Essays. Thoreau’s essays were first prepared as lectures and later published. He wrote on a variety of topics but most of his essays deal with experience in the natural world and the responsibility of the individual, particularly in regard to the issue of slavery, which Thoreau strongly opposed.
      4. *Walden*. A record of Thoreau’s time living in nature near Walden Pond.
   3. Margaret Fuller. *Woman in the 19th Century.* Wrote one of the first intellectual works on the equality of women, which presents the idea that women have the same ability as men to think and understand the world deeply.
   4. John Muir. Father of the American environmental movement, he was the first person to call for the preservation of large wilderness areas. He believed that humans could not reach their true potential without spending some time alone in nature.
   5. Bronson Alcott. An influential social reformer, Alcott was involved in many reform movements, including women’s rights, the abolition movement, and education reform. He believed human perfection was possible.
2. **Key Ideas**
   1. It is possible to think of Transcendentalism as a mixture of Romanticism and Eastern religious traditions, especially the Vedic tradition of India. Emerson and Thoreau read the new translations of Hindu and Buddhist scriptures and were fascinated.
   2. The movement also drew ideas from the German Idealists, especially Kant’s theory of transcendent knowledge. This states that there is a special connection between our ability to have self-knowledge and our ability to have experiences in the world.
   3. Spending time in quiet thought, or meditation, especially in nature, is the best way to understand reality. Nature is a metaphor for the spiritual world.
   4. The way that we live our life is very important. Gaining wisdom is more important than gaining money or possessions. Transcendental thinkers were very skeptical of the growing American obsession with personal wealth and power.
   5. A person’s public life should match their private thinking. For this reason the Transcendentalists were very active politically in fighting slavery, defending the rights of women, pushing for economic reforms, and developing early environmental thought.

**Thoreau and “Walking”**

1. Thoreau Biography.
   1. Born on July 12th, 1817 in Concord, Mass. His father was a pencil maker. Thoreau attended and graduated from Harvard University in 1837. After graduation he worked as a school teacher for a short time. He also met Emerson in 1837 and published essays in the transcendentalist magazine *The Dial.*
   2. Thoreau and Emerson. Thoreau loved Emerson and even lived with him for a time. Their relationship was difficult. They argued a lot and didn’t understand each other. There is also some indication that Thoreau may have fallen in love with Emerson’s wife.
   3. Employment. Thoreau struggled throughout his life to find a way to make money without ruining himself morally. He attempted to sell his writings but they were not popular. He managed Emerson’s household during Emerson’s many lecture tours. He also helped in his father’s pencil factory and taught school for a time.
   4. Politics: “Civil Disobedience.” Thoreau believed that it was the responsibility of each individual to stand against evil when they see it. In fact, Thoreau was forced to spend the night in jail when he refused to pay his taxes. He was protesting against the Mexican-American war, which he saw as a means of expanding the slave territories of the American south.
   5. Death. Thoreau became ill in 1861 and died of tuberculosis in 1862.
2. Major Themes in Thoreau’s Writings
   1. Self-awareness. Thoreau is very worried that people have become so busy that they have forgotten to take the time to understand how to live correctly.
      1. Living Awake. He writes again and again about how little the people around him see the real world. Unimportant things like earning money distract them.
      2. Simplicity. The key to a good life is to live very simply. You do not need a large house and an important job to be happy. Get rid of all of your possessions and you will be free to live. For Thoreau, living basically means thinking.
   2. Pure Nature vs. “Dirty” Civilization. Nature is a great place to think and for this reason Thoreau loves the mountain and the forest and he hates the city.
   3. The “Inner Life.” Thoreau believes that we all have the ability to have a rich and nourishing inner life, but that most people let that part of themselves die.
   4. Nature as Metaphor. For Thoreau, nature is a teacher. The flowers, the trees, the animals, the sky, and every other part of nature have a lesson to give us if we will just listen.
3. “Walking”
   1. Background. Thoreau delivered the essay as a lecture about 10 times in the 1850’s and revised it many times. He considered it to be a summary of his entire philosophy. It was not published until after his death, in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1862.
   2. Themes
      1. Wildness. “In wildness is the preservation of the world.”
      2. The Holy Land. Nature is a Holy Place for Thoreau, like a church or temple.
      3. The City vs. The Wilderness. He finds himself drawn away from the city into the wild.
   3. Discussion Questions
      1. In the essay, Thoreau describes nature as a “holy” (spiritually valuable) place. Have you ever experienced a feeling like this when you were in nature?
      2. Thoreau says in this essay: “Above all, we cannot afford to live in the present. He is blessed over all mortals who loses no moment of the passing life in remembering the past.” How much time do you spend thinking about past mistakes or worrying about future problems that might not even happen? Is this wasted time?
      3. Thoreau writes “The highest that we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence.” What do you think he means?
      4. “If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again…then you are ready for a walk?” What do you think he means?