The History of 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.