

## **TRANSCENDENTALISM BACKGROUND**

You will read the texts on this document and on the link for Transcendentalism Background.

### **Required Notes**

Using the texts I've given you, you need to become educated in regards to many aspects of Transcendentalism. I've broken down this philosophy into various topic areas, and your job is to acquire as much knowledge as possible regarding these topics from our texts. As you read, highlight or underline major ideas and compile them into your notes.

The topics:

- The individual
- Nature
- Truth
- Oversoul/God/religion
- Morality (right vs. wrong)
- Life/time
- The word "transcend"

### **About Transcendentalism:**

"It is a concept which suggests that the external is united with the internal. Physical or material nature is neutral or indifferent or objective; it is neither helpful nor hurtful; it is neither beautiful nor ugly. What makes one give such attributes to nature is that individual's imposition of her/his temperament or mood or psyche. If I'm feeling lousy, I may dismiss a gorgeous day; if I'm feeling bright and cheerful then the most dreary of days becomes tolerable. And so, the Transcendentalists believed that "knowing yourself" and "studying nature" is the same activity. Nature mirrors our psyche. If I cannot understand myself, may be understanding nature will help."

**FROM "USHISTORY.ORG" ([HTTP://WWW.USHISTORY.ORG/US/26F.ASP](http://www.ushistory.org/us/26f.asp))**

**TRANSCENDENTALISM** is a very formal word that describes a very simple idea. People, men and women equally, have knowledge about themselves and the world around them that "transcends" or goes beyond what they can see, hear, taste, touch or feel.

This knowledge comes through intuition and imagination not through logic or the senses. People can trust themselves to be their own authority on what is right. A **TRANSCENDENTALIST** is a person who accepts these ideas not as religious beliefs but as a way of understanding life relationships.

The individuals most closely associated with this new way of thinking were connected loosely through a group known as **THE TRANSCENDENTAL CLUB**, which met in the Boston home of **GEORGE RIPLEY**. Their chief publication was a periodical called "The Dial," edited by Margaret Fuller, a political radical and feminist whose book "Women of the Nineteenth Century" was among the most famous of its time. The club had many extraordinary thinkers, but accorded the leadership position to **RALPH WALDO EMERSON**.

Emerson was a Harvard-educated essayist and lecturer and is recognized as our first truly "American" thinker. In his most famous essay, "**THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR**," he urged Americans to stop looking to Europe for inspiration and imitation and be themselves. He believed that people were naturally good and that everyone's potential was limitless. He inspired his colleagues to look into themselves, into nature, into art, and through work for answers to life's most perplexing questions. His intellectual contributions to the philosophy of transcendentalism inspired a uniquely American idealism and spirit of reform.

The theory of books is noble. The scholar of the  
first age received into him the world around;  
brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of  
his own mind, and uttered it again.  
It came into him, life; it went out from him, truth.  
It came to him, short-lived actions; it went out  
from him, immortal thoughts.  
It came to him, business; it went from him, poetry.  
It was dead fact; now, it is quick thought.  
It can stand, and it can go.  
It now endures, it now flies, it now inspires  
Precisely in proportion to the depth of mind from  
which it issued, so high does it soar, so long does it  
sing.

-Excerpt from *The American Scholar*, Ralph  
Waldo Emerson

The Transcendental Club was associated with colorful members between 1836 and 1860. Among these were literary figures **NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE**, **HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW**, and **WALT WHITMAN**. But the most interesting character by far was **HENRY DAVID THOREAU**, who tried to put transcendentalism into practice. A great admirer of Emerson, Thoreau nevertheless was his own man — described variously as strange, gentle, fanatic, selfish, a dreamer, a stubborn individualist. For two years Thoreau carried out the most famous experiment in self-reliance when he went to **WALDEN POND**, built a hut, and tried to live self-sufficiently without the trappings or interference of society. Later, when he wrote about the simplicity and unity of all things in nature, his faith in humanity, and his sturdy individualism, Thoreau reminded everyone that life is wasted pursuing wealth and following social customs. Nature can show that "all good things are wild and free."

As a group, the transcendentalists led the celebration of the American experiment as one of individualism and self-reliance. They took progressive stands on women's rights, abolition, reform, and education. They criticized government, organized religion, laws, social institutions, and creeping industrialization. They created an American "state of mind" in which imagination was better than reason, creativity was better than theory, and action was better than contemplation. And they had faith that all would be well because humans could transcend limits and reach astonishing heights.

## **Basic Tenets of American Transcendentalism**

**Note :** This list must not be considered to be a creed common to all transcendentalists. It is merely a grouping of certain important concepts shared by many of them.

1. Transcendentalism, essentially, is a form of idealism.
2. The transcendentalist "transcends" or rises above the lower animalistic impulses of life (animal drives) and moves from the rational to a spiritual realm.
3. The human soul is part of the Oversoul or universal spirit (or "float" for Whitman) to which it and other souls return at death.
4. Therefore, every individual is to be respected because everyone has a portion of that Oversoul (God).
5. This Oversoul or Life Force or God can be found everywhere - travel to holy places is, therefore, not necessary.
6. God can be found in both nature and human nature (Nature, Emerson stated, has spiritual manifestations).
7. Jesus also had part of God in himself - he was divine as everyone is divine - except in that he lived an exemplary and transcendental life and made the best use of that Power which is within each one.
8. "Miracle is monster." The miracles of the Bible are not to be regarded as important as they were to the people of the past. Miracles are all about us - the whole world is a miracle and the smallest creature is one. "A mouse is a miracle enough to stagger quintillions of infidels." - Whitman
9. More important than a concern about the afterlife, should be a concern for this life - "the one thing in the world of value is the active soul." - Emerson
10. Death is never to be feared, for at death the soul merely passes to the oversoul.
11. Emphasis should be placed on the here and now. "Give me one world at a time." - Thoreau
12. Evil is a negative - merely an absence of good. Light is more powerful than darkness because one ray of light penetrates the dark. In other words, there is no belief in the existence of Satan as an active entity forcing humans to commit immorality. Humans are good and if they do immoral acts they do so out of ignorance and by not thinking.
13. Power is to be obtained by defying fate or predestination, which seem to work against humans, by exercising one's own spiritual and moral strength. Emphasis on self-reliance.
14. Hence, the emphasis is placed on a human thinking.
15. The transcendentalists see the necessity of examples of great leaders, writers, philosophers, and others, to show what an individual can become through thinking and action.
16. It is foolish to worry about consistency, because what an intelligent person believes tomorrow, if he/she trusts oneself, tomorrow may be completely different from what that person thinks and believes today. "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." - Emerson
17. The unity of life and universe must be realized. There is a relationship between all things.
18. One must have faith in intuition, for no church or creed can communicate truth.
19. Reform must not be emphasized - true reform comes from within.

## **Transcendentalism: Central Points of Agreement**

**NOTE :** The Transcendentalists, in keeping with the individualistic nature of this philosophy, disagreed readily with each other. Here are **four** points of general agreement:

### **Basic Assumption:**

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

### **Basic Premises:**

1. An individual is the spiritual center of the universe - and in an individual can be found the clue to nature, history and, ultimately, the cosmos itself. It is not a rejection of the existence of God, but a preference to explain an individual and the world in terms of an individual.
2. The structure of the universe literally duplicates the structure of the individual self - all knowledge, therefore, begins with self-knowledge. This is similar to Aristotle's dictum "know thyself."
3. Transcendentalists accepted the neo-Platonic conception of nature as a living mystery, full of signs - nature is symbolic.
4. The belief that individual virtue and happiness depend upon self-realization - this depends upon the reconciliation of two universal psychological tendencies:
  - a. the expansive or self-transcending tendency - a desire to embrace the whole world - to know and become one with the world.
  - b. the contracting or self-asserting tendency - the desire to withdraw, remain unique and separate - an egotistical existence.

This dualism assumes our two psychological needs; the contracting: being unique, different, special, having a racial identity, ego-centered, selfish, and so on; the expansive: being the same as others, altruistic, be one of the human race, and so on.

The transcendentalist expectation is to move from the contracting to the expansive. This dualism has aspects of Freudian id and superego; the Jungian shadow and persona, the Chinese ying/yang, and the Hindu movement from *Atman* (egotistic existence) to *Brahma* (cosmic existence).