

TRANSCENDENTALISM BACKGROUND

You will the following texts:

- Textbook p. 170-2 (Blue heading: “The Transcendentalists: True Reality is Spiritual”)
- “Transcendentalism Background” document from the website
- “About Transcendentalism” passage on the bottom of this sheet

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.”

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).