Transcendentalism Online Lesson

Transcendental - being beyond ordinary or common experience, thought, or belief.

“Transcend”

- Meaning to live on a level above and beyond the common or the physical.
American Transcendentalism (1836-1860) is...

• An early 19th Century American philosophy – not a literary period.

• Associated primarily with Ralph Waldo Emerson, & centered in the Boston area.

• Significant interest in new forms of education & society, including utopian communities (e.g. Brook Farm).
Transcendentalism...

- rejects the idea that knowledge can be fully derived from experience and observation; truth resides in the spiritual world and within ourselves; therefore, self-reliance and individuality are critical.
Transcendentalism...

- Belief that people are innately good.
- All life (people, animals, etc.) are connected and share the same soul; there is an essential unity of all creation.
- There is a deep continuity between nature and humans; nature thus has deep religious meaning.
- If man was left to his natural state – not influenced by society – he would naturally be moral.
- Society pollutes man.

“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”

-Henry David Thoreau
philosopher, writer, author, poet, born July 12, 1817-1862
Transcendentalism never spread more than 50 miles from Boston; however, it is said to be the inspiration for the following:

• Walt Whitman & Robert Frost
• Civil Rights Movement of the 20th Century

“Peace is always Beautiful.”

~Walt Whitman

Two roads diverged in a wood and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

~Robert Frost.
Topics Commonly found in Transcendental Thought:
- Nonconformity
- Self-reliance
- Free Thought
- Confidence
- Importance of Nature
There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better or worse as his portion; that though the wise universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried.

Excerpt from "Self-Reliance"
Biography

• Born in 1803 in Boston, MA
• Occupations: Unitarian minister, public lecturer, essayist
  • 1836: writes Nature
• That same year, starts meeting with the Transcendental Club: Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, & Bronson Alcott
• Continued traveling and writing until his death in 1882.
• Master stylist - focused on clarity and rhythm within his prose.
• Focused on the following: unity within nature, the importance of the individual, and the need to live in the present.
• Felt that society viewed nonconformity as a threat, and that society promoted uniformity and blind obedience.

“To be great is to be misunderstood.”
Ralph Waldo Emerson
Henry David Thoreau
Best known for Walden, a reflection upon simple living in natural surroundings, and his essay Civil Disobedience, an argument for individual resistance to the government in moral opposition to an unjust state.
• Built a cabin on property owned by Emerson & moved in on July 4th, 1845.
• Lived economically & comfortably for two years & two months.
• Experiment in self-reliance, but not a flight from society.
In 1854, Thoreau published *Walden*, or *Life in the Woods*. The book compressed the time into a single calendar year, using the passage of four seasons to symbolize human development.

*Walden* initially won few admirers, but today it is regarded as a classic that explores natural simplicity, harmony, and beauty as models for just social and cultural conditions.
In 1846, during a day trip to town, Thoreau was arrested for refusing to pay poll taxes (fees to vote) in protest against the Mexican American War.

He spent one night in jail, but to Thoreau his imprisonment was an act of conscience not lawlessness.

His description of being imprisoned underlies the central theme in his most famous essay “Civil Disobedience” published in 1849.

Civil Disobedience refers to nonviolent protest against laws he considered unjust – civil as distinct from military protest.

Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is in prison

- Henry David Thoreau
Civil Disobedience: refusal to obey civil laws in an effort to induce change in governmental policy or legislation, characterized by the use of passive resistance or other nonviolent means.

"Anyone in a free society where the laws are unjust has an obligation to break the law." — Thoreau
Both Gandhi (leader of India’s struggle against Great Britain) & Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. urged protestors who wanted change to use non-violent protest to express themselves.

Both were heavily influenced by Thoreau.