Introduction to Transcendentalism

“It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.”

— Ralph Waldo Emerson
First, what is transcendentalism?

An early 19th century American school of philosophy centered in the Boston area.

Core Belief: There is some knowledge or truth that humans grasp not through logic, science, or sense, but through the intuition (feeling) of their divine intellect.
Kant - a famous philosopher - claimed that “all knowledge is **transcendental** which is not concerned with objects but knowing objects.”

So, what does transcendental even mean?

Being beyond ordinary or common experience, thought, or belief
Fall of 1836 was the 1st meeting of the Transcendental Club.
Met in Boston for 3 or 4 years.
Emerson was said to be the most faithful member.
At first, the “club” was comprised of Unitarian ministers and ex-ministers. Then college professors, farmers, mechanics, merchants and women joined in.
The club members were mostly pretty young, in their 20s and 30s. Thoreau was the youngest at age 22.
Important topics/concerns: new forms of education and society, including utopian communities.
Essentially, their goal was to improve the world.
Topics Commonly found in Transcendental Thought:

- Nonconformity
- Self-reliance
- Free Thought
- Confidence
- Importance of Nature

Hint: These are the most important aspects of Transcendentalism! Be sure you know these!!!!
• There is an essential unity of all creation.
• There is a deep continuity between nature and humans.
• Nature thus has deep religious meaning.
The Basic Premises of Transcendentalism

• Within each individual lie the clues to nature and history.
• All knowledge begins with self-knowledge.
• Nature is a living mystery full of signs.
• Nature is symbolic and spiritual.
• One must have faith in intuition (feelings), for no church or traditional belief can communicate truth.
Transcendentalism rejects the idea that knowledge can be fully derived from experience and observation; rather, truth resides in the spiritual world. Emerson argued that, while the physical world is important, providing us with necessary goods and frequent beauty, people should live their lives based on truths grasped through reason, not physical perception. People will find truth within themselves; therefore, self-reliance and individuality are critical.
All people are born good.
If man was left to his natural state (not influenced by society) he would naturally be moral.
Society pollutes man.
Consciousness and Knowledge

Because of the continuity of nature and spirit, to understand spiritual truths, you need to develop sensitivity to and communion with nature. Time spent in contemplation of nature and its beauty is an essential part of the religious process.

Basic belief: “By meditating, by communing with nature through art, man transcends his senses and finds beauty, goodness, and truth”
A final statement of belief...

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

So the emphasis should be placed on the here and now.

"Give me one world at a time." - Thoreau
The Impact of Transcendentalism:
Although it never spread more than 50 miles from Boston, it inspired important people and movements!

As well as the "beat" generation of the 1950s and the "young radicals" of the '60s and '70s who practiced dissent, anti-materialism, anti-war, and anti-work ethic sentiments.
At your table, discuss the topics that follow. You will want to put your responses on your own notebook paper to turn in!
Your Transcendental Contemplations . . .
These first three questions need to have responses that are 3-4 sentences each.

1. How is Transcendentalism similar to Romanticism?
2. What method is used to arrive at truth in Transcendentalism?
3. What danger is there in accepting a Transcendental approach to truth?
4. Transcendentalists believe it is best to live as close to nature as possible, for there a person can most successfully contemplate his/her reason for being.

On a scale of 1-10 (10 being that you are in the thick of nature) how close to nature do you believe you are “living”? Provide a number and then explain your response.
5. Transcendentalists believe one should work (for money) only enough to fulfill basic needs. One must then dedicate the rest of your time to personal growth.

On a scale of 1-10 (10 being all you do is think about how to better yourself in a non-materialistic way) how much time do you spend on your own personal growth? Provide a number and then explain your response.

**Hint:** Improving personal growth could be: working out, meditating, learning something just for you (not for a class), quitting a bad habit, journaling/blogging, doing something new to get yourself out of the comfort zone, etc . . . anything that helps you to become a better you!
6. Transcendentalists believe people should be both physically and intellectually active throughout life.

On a scale of 1-10 (10 being the very highest level) how would you rate your physical activity and how would you rate your intellectual activity? Provide a number and then explain your response.

(You will have two numbers for this one and two responses – be sure you label one physical activity and the other intellectual activity.)
7. Transcendentalists believe it is most important to be yourself and become a person of principle (standards, beliefs), and then live by those principles, even if the majority of society doesn’t agree.

On a scale of 1-10 (10 being you are the truest form of you in private and in public and no matter the situation you ALWAYS stand up for your beliefs) how close to being the truest form of you are you in both public and private? Provide a number and then explain your response.
In the end . . .

✓ Romantic and Transcendental writers opened the door to imagination and intuition, abandoning ALL allegiance to reason.

✓ Transcendentalism celebrates the individual as a source of hope, beauty, and greater knowledge.

8. One last question - which you do think is more important: reason or imagination? You have to pick one. Explain this last one in a paragraph of 5-7 sentences.