

Transcendentalism

American writers of the first half of the 19th century were part of an international romantic trend in literature and art. Among the many characteristics of this romantic period was a stress on the individual instead of the group, stress on the wild instead of the tame, and stress on the irregular instead of the regular. In this atmosphere a new kind of philosophy emerged: TRANSCENDENTALISM.

Transcendentalism was based on ideas of German idealists (Immanuel Kant) and British romantics (Coleridge, Wordsworth). It was a social, literary and political movement that originated and developed in New England (in Boston) among intelligentsia. Transcendentalists wanted to overcome the limitations of the senses in order to see the roots of things. They tried to find truth through feeling and intuition rather than through reasoning and logic. For Emerson, one of the leading transcendentalists, one of the specific discoveries was „the all in each“. He discovered that „the individual is the world“. He placed the individual at the spiritual center of the universe. Nature was also very important for transcendentalists. Birds, clouds, trees, and snow had a special meaning for them. This, however, does not mean that they did not believe in God. It only means they did not think of God as something apart from human beings. Transcendentalism also involved a rejection of the strict Puritan religious attitudes. In addition, it opposed dogmatic theology of all established religious institutions.

American transcendentalism began with the formation of the Transcendental Club in Boston in 1836. This club published a magazine, *The Dial*. For a time, the movement had an experimental community, the Brook Farm. Among the leaders of the movement were the essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, the feminist and social reformer Margaret Fuller, and the writer and naturalist Henry David Thoreau. Even if the numbers of transcendentalists were low, their lasting importance was great.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

the chief spokesman for transcendentalism; born in Boston; toured Europe, met there Wordsworth and Coleridge; after returning to Boston, he devoted most of his time to lecturing; was concerned with many reform movements, among them the abolition of slavery

The American Scholar (1837), an essay, Emerson attacked the influence of tradition and the past, and called for a new burst of American creativity. To him, the word scholar did not refer to the man of book learning, but to the original thinker. Such a man knows himself through intuition and the study of nature, not of books.

Self-reliance (1841), an essay, Emerson insists that man should trust himself to decide what was right and act according to it. The idea of not trusting anybody else, just ourselves, became later very influential. „Do your own thing“ became a slogan of a hippie movement in 1960s

Nature (1836), an essay, the clearest statement of transcendentalist ideas. Emerson claims that man should not see nature merely as something to be used, that man's relationship with nature transcends the idea of usefulness

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

Emerson's close friend; interested in Eastern religions, his study of these religions contributed to his desire for a simple life; an individualist distrusting group action and preferring to depend on individual reform for the improvement of society. Thoreau made two notable contributions to American ideas: 1) people should live instead of working for a living (see *Walden*) 2) if people think a law is unjust, they should resist it by civil disobedience (see *Resistance to Civil Government*)

Walden (1854), a book. From 1845 to 1847 Thoreau lived alone in a hut he built for himself on the shore of Walden Pond. He wanted to live alone and to depend on his own mental and physical resources. He raised his own food and devote most of his time to study and reflection. Later, Thoreau wrote a book describing his way of life during those 2 years: about the practical things he had to do every day, about the plants and animals one can find in the woods, about the changing seasons. In this book Thoreau rejected the things ordinary people desire in life, such as money and possessions. Instead, he emphasized the search for true wisdom, for life spent in harmony with nature.

Resistance to Civil Government (1849), an essay, later known as *Civil Disobedience*, in it Thoreau came with a concept of peaceful resistance as the final instrument of minority opinion

Margaret Fuller (1810-1850)

journalist, feminist; worked as an editor-in-chief of the *Dial*; organized a discussion group of women in Boston; as a journalist she focused her attention on specific social issues of the day, like capital punishment, female prisoners, the abolitionist movement, the war on Mexico, treatment of madness.

Woman in the Nineteenth Century (1845), a non-fiction book, in which Fuller gave arguments for full equality of opportunity and for abolishing stereotyped gender roles. Fuller recognized that both men and women were imprisoned by social roles

