

Transcendentalism





Howard Pyle

Salem Wolf (A Wolf Had Not Been Seen at Salem for Thirty Years), 1909

The Delaware Art Museum





Albert Bierstadt
White Mountains, New Hampshire, 1863
Duke University Museum of Art, Durham, N. C.

What does “transcendentalism” mean?

- There is an ideal spiritual state which “transcends” the physical and empirical.
- A loose collection of eclectic ideas about literature, philosophy, religion, social reform, and the general state of American culture.
- Transcendentalism had different meanings for each person involved in the movement.

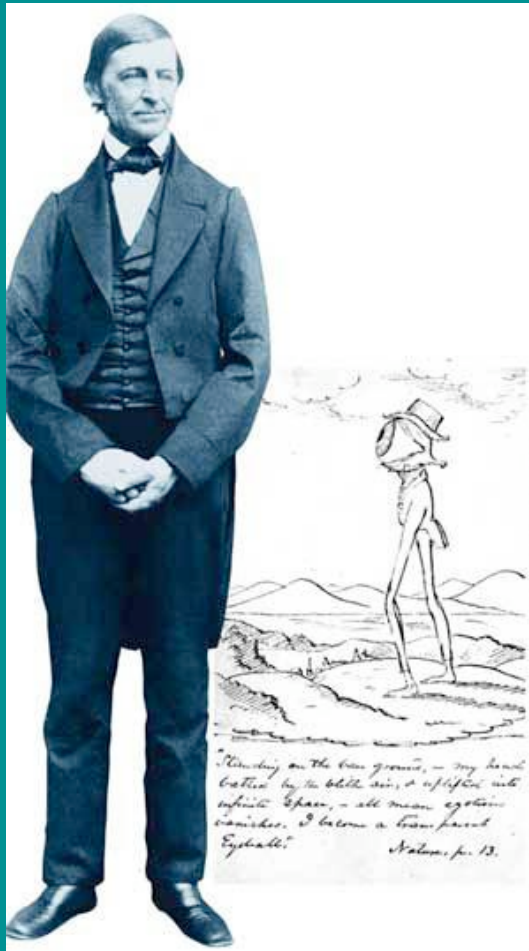
Where did it come from?

- Reaction against New England Puritanism
- Reaction against eighteenth-century rationalism (Enlightenment)
- Emerging ideal of American democracy
- English Romanticism
- German philosophy
- Eastern Philosophy (Hinduism)

What did Transcendentalists believe?

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 Premise #1



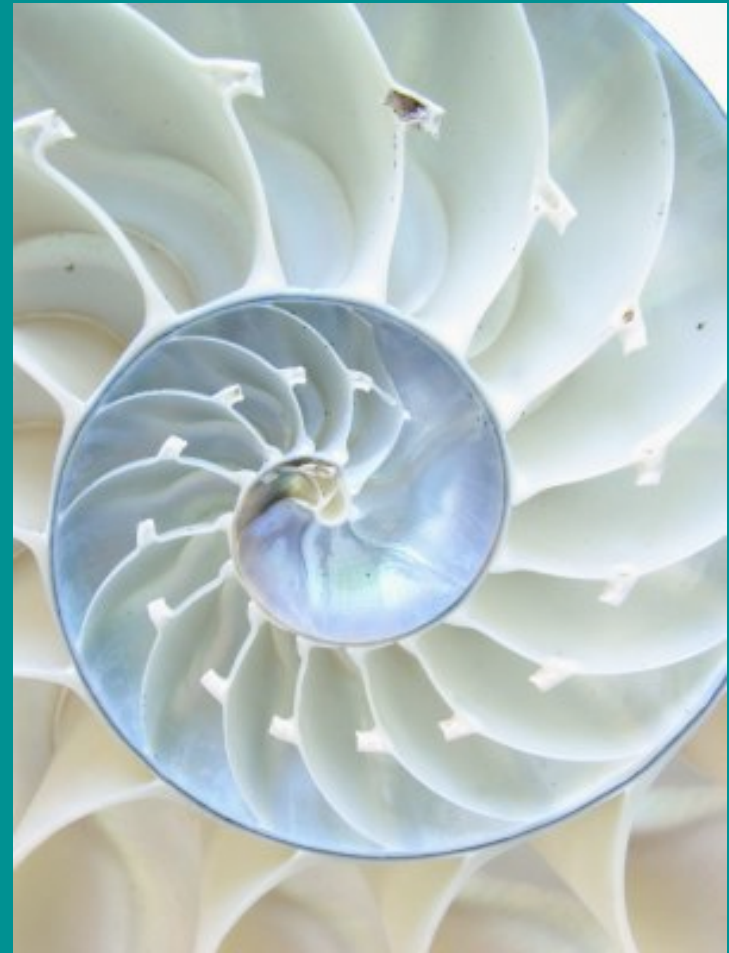
An individual is the spiritual center of the universe, and in an individual can be found the clue to nature, history and, ultimately, the cosmos itself. It is not a rejection of the existence of God, but a preference to explain an individual and the world in terms of an individual.

A Transparent Eyeball



Basic Premise #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."



Basic Premise #3

Transcendentalists accepted the concept of nature as a living mystery, full of signs; nature is symbolic.



Basic Premise #4

The belief that individual virtue and happiness depend upon self-realization—this depends upon the reconciliation of two universal psychological tendencies:

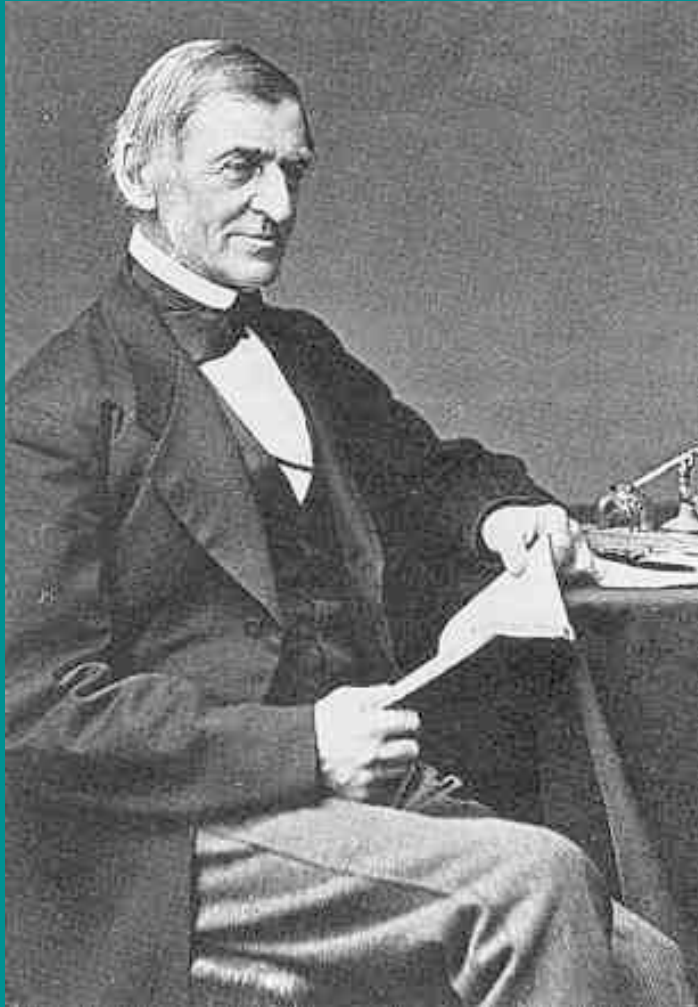
1. The desire to embrace the whole world—to know and become one with the world.
2. The desire to withdraw, remain unique and separate—an egotistical existence.

Who were the Transcendentalists?

- Ralph Waldo Emerson
- Henry David Thoreau
- Amos Bronson Alcott
- Margaret Fuller
- Ellery Channing



Ralph Waldo Emerson



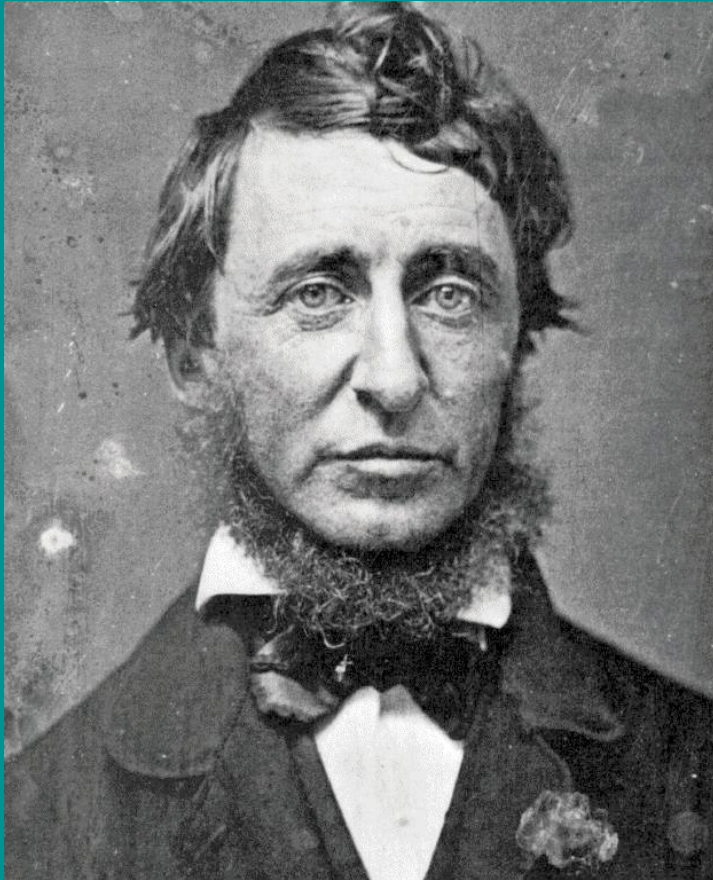
- 1803-1882
- Unitarian minister
- Poet and essayist
- Founded the Transcendental Club
- Popular lecturer
- Banned from Harvard for 40 years following his Divinity School address
- Supporter of abolitionism



Emerson's Writing

- Poetry, Essays, Sermons
- Reliance on self
- Redemption lies within the individual
- Individual perceptions matter most
- Importance of building your own philosophy
- Non-Conformity
- Nature as ideal

Henry David Thoreau



- 1817-1862
- Schoolteacher, essayist, poet
- Most famous for *Walden* and *Civil Disobedience*
- Influenced environmental movement
- Supporter of abolitionism
- Early memory was of staying awake at night "looking through the stars to see if I could see God behind them."