

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

**Transcendentalism:
Essential Essays of Emerson and Thoreau**

written by Tom Zolper

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ISBN 978-1-60389-154-7
Reorder No. 302733

Transcendentalism

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. analyze the significance of the included essays within the context of Transcendental philosophy.
2. trace the development of the themes found in the essays, including:
 - a. independence and individuality
 - b. the role of Nature
 - c. the primacy of the individual conscience.
3. explain how the authors' backgrounds emerge in the themes of their essays.
4. analyze the ways in which tone and diction contribute to the meaning of the essays.
5. analyze the ways in which syntax lends itself to tone construction.
6. explain how biblical, classical, and historical allusions contribute to the overall meanings of the essays.
7. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
8. respond to free-response items similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
9. offer a close reading of selected Transcendentalist essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Lecture Notes

I. WHAT IS TRANSCENDENTALISM?

In the 150+ years since Waldo Emerson (as he preferred to be called) published his essay, “The Transcendentalist,” there have been almost as many definitions and explanations of Transcendentalism as there have been people offering those definitions and explanations. Indeed, part of the strength and weakness of the Transcendental Movement and the system of thought it engendered is that there is no one “creed,” no one set of beliefs—philosophical, spiritual, or ethical—that all Transcendentalists embraced.

Part of the goal of the Transcendentalists was to rethink theories of how the mind perceived and understood the world, the Divine, and itself. The prevailing thought of the day taught that such Truth existed outside of the mind and could be learned only through experience and reason. The Transcendentalists—like their European literary counterparts, the Romantics—believed that Truth lay within each individual and could be known intuitively.

Indeed, the very emphasis of Transcendentalism on the Individual and the Individual’s ability to discern Truth would make any attempt to codify it into a simple nutshell statement an oxymoron. In “The Transcendentalist,” Emerson defined Transcendentalism as “Idealism as it appears in 1842.” This “idealism” was a call to individuals to turn their backs on the materialistic, industrial, and corporate aspects of the world and to explore the mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects. In exploring these aspects, however, the individual was further called upon to reject the ideas of the past: old doctrines and dogmas that had, in the opinion of the Transcendentalists, been the cause of war and oppression. Rather, the individual was to examine his or her own innermost being and arrive at his or her own intuitive knowledge of truth. So adamant were Emerson and Thoreau that each individual must intuit his or her own truth, that neither desired “followers” or “disciples.” Both admonished their would-be disciples to find their *own* way rather than imitate the beliefs and lives of the authors. Each must follow his or her own instincts and not conform to the dictates of society. Although society would always attempt to influence the individual toward conformity, the individual must always struggle to remain true to his or her self and to his or her identity.

Ironically, however, it was Transcendentalism’s emphasis on individual thought and effort that doomed it as a fleeting movement never to be institutionalized. Still, it was enormously influential in defining what it would mean to be an intellectual in America in the following centuries.

The principles of transcendentalism were, in fact, so individual—and its sources so varied—the philosophies of Plato, Emanuel Swedenbourg, and the German Romantics—that the philosophy was condemned by critics as ill-defined and unknowable.

Transcendentalism

Self-Reliance

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

1. Why does Emerson begin this essay by asserting, “The sentiment [the original verses he encountered] instil is of more value than any thought they may contain”?

2. What, according to Emerson, is genius?

3. What point does Emerson make by alluding to Moses, Plato, and Milton?

4. What is it that makes any great work of art great?

5. What have been Emerson’s methods of development in the first paragraph of this essay?

6. What does Emerson mean when he says, “imitation is suicide”?

Friendship

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

1. What is the essence of the prevailing simile in the second paragraph of this essay?

2. What, according to Emerson, is friendship?

3. How, according to Emerson, does one's friendship affect how one regards his or her friend?

4. What is the strength of friendship that allows Emerson to write, "When they are real, they are not glass threads or frost-work, but the solidest thing we know"?

5. In what way is a would-be friend like an Olympian?

Civil Disobedience

—Henry David Thoreau

1. What contemporary issue does Thoreau reveal as the motivation for this essay?

2. What does Thoreau suggest would be an alternative to government?

3. In what way, according to Thoreau, are soldiers “men of straw,” or “lump[s] of earth”?

4. What irony does Thoreau make note of regarding philanthropy? What is his point?

from Walden

— by Henry David Thoreau

Where I Lived, And What I Lived For

1. What does Thoreau mean when he writes that a house is nothing more than a *sedes*?

2. For Thoreau, what was the true value of the farms he visited and surveyed?

3. What effect is created by Thoreau’s frequent references to constellations and Greek myth? What is Thoreau’s intent?

4. What does Thoreau mean when he says he wanted to “live deliberately”?

5. What does Thoreau likely include in what he calls “the essential facts of life”?

The Village

1. What does Thoreau say in this chapter that suggests that he is not the hermit and the misanthrope he is often accused of being?

2. In what way does Concord resemble a prairie-dog colony?

3. What famous event in Thoreau's life does he allude to at the end of this essay? Why does he save this episode for the end?

The Ponds

1. What is Thoreau’s point about the flavor of huckleberries? Why can the person who buys them at market or the farmer who grows them for the market not truly taste them?

2. What is the point of the allusion to Adam and Eve?

3. What quality of the pool is Thoreau emphasizing with his allusion to the Castalian Fountain?

4. What effect is achieved when Thoreau asserts hyperbolically that the ponds of Massachusetts are “lovelier than diamonds”?

Higher Laws

1. List some of the “higher laws” to which Thoreau alludes.

2. What, according to Thoreau, is the connection between immaturity and hunting, so that he asserts that a boy should eventually outgrow his affection for hunting?

3. What would be ironic about a hunting parson?

4. Explain the pun in Thoreau’s observing that a hunting parson might make “a good shepherd’s dog, but is far from being the Good Shepherd.”

5. Why would Thoreau feel himself diminished every time he catches a fish?
