

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

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

by Ralph Waldo Emerson & Henry David Thoreau

written by Rebecca Challman

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Background Information

“The Transcendentalist adopts the whole connection of spiritual doctrine. He believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy.” – **Ralph Waldo Emerson**, *The Transcendentalist*

“In all things of nature, there is something of the marvelous.” – **Aristotle**

When people hear the word *Transcendentalism*, they tend to equate its meaning with its root, *transcend*, meaning “to rise above the human experience.” In fact, though, the philosophy of Transcendentalism actually refers to that which is within the human mind. It refers to the innate ability within all people to fulfill their potential, to overcome adversity, to face challenges directly, to rely on an inner voice and instinct to guide them through life. Listening to the inner voice, the Transcendentalist, at one with God and Nature, grows into an autonomous, self-reliant individual who feels no need to seek affirmation outside of him or herself.

American Transcendentalism began as a combination of Unitarian theology—including the belief that God is one, rather than the Catholic “trinity”—and German philosophy in the mid-1800s. The Industrial Revolution was bringing rapid change to the country. A new materialism distracted Americans in vast numbers. Being a good citizen meant abiding by laws that were not always moral or right. For example, in a blend of greed, commerce, and immoral law, the federal government decreed in the Fugitive Slave Laws that slaves who managed to escape to the North were still property and must be returned to their owners.

Transcendentalists, including Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, spoke out against such injustice. Their contemporaries, including Hawthorne and Poe, often viewed them as radical nonconformists. Thoreau and Emerson used *The Dial* magazine, founded by women’s rights activist Margaret Fuller, as a platform to speak about such topics as equal rights for women, the abolishment of slavery, the rights and responsibilities of the individual, and the injustices perpetrated in the name of Democracy.

The Transcendentalists valued individuality above social acceptance and creativity above financial prosperity. More controversial, however, was their belief that the Divine existed within Nature and that man existed above the traditional deity of organized religion, which they believed inspired fear and condemnation of self and of others. The movement also valued personal vision and truth above external reality, and its proponents believed in experiential education to heighten innate curiosity, rather than the rote memorization and drilling employed by public schools.

Most Transcendentalists became unhappy with social and political developments of the day. As a group, they developed and honed a powerful political voice, which can be seen as a forerunner of and inspiration to the Environmental Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the fight for women’s rights, and the struggle to end wars through peaceful protest. The Transcendentalists helped define the spirit of American individualism and independence.

Henry David Thoreau

Although Henry David Thoreau was thoroughly educated in law, religion, business, and academics, he chose to live simply rather than pursue prosperity in any field. From working in his family's pencil factory to surveying land, to serving as Ralph Waldo Emerson's handy man, Thoreau's primary pursuit was always knowledge, not money, or social status.

Thoreau grew up, for the most part, on a farm near Concord, Massachusetts. He enjoyed close familial relationships, especially with his brother John. Thoreau attended Concord Academy and then Harvard College. He learned to speak several languages. He read voraciously, everything from English literature to Hindu mysticism, to the Greek classics in their original form.

Thoreau taught for a while, but found he could not support the public school system, because it endorsed corporal punishment and suppressed individuality. He and his brother John opened a private school, where they cultivated children's curiosity and spurned traditional teaching methods, such as methodical memorization. There, Thoreau encouraged budding writer Louisa May Alcott. The enlightened endeavor was short lived, however, because of John's deteriorating health. John died from lockjaw in 1842. Two years later, the only woman Thoreau ever loved, Ellen Sewall, married another man. Earlier, her minister father had forbidden her to marry Thoreau, whose radical ideas and empty pockets offended his Unitarian sensibilities.

By this point, Thoreau was writing and even had an agent. Although he briefly tried living in New York, and later traveled a bit about the country, he never really enjoyed straying too far from home. The adventures his rich natural environment afforded him provided the basis for his first book *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849). They also figured heavily in his journal writing, which he began at Ralph Waldo Emerson's request in 1837 and continued until a few months prior to his death in 1862. His journal, first published in full in 1906, comprises fourteen volumes and exceeds two million words.

Emerson, Thoreau's mentor in Transcendentalism, gave the commencement address at Thoreau's graduation from Harvard in 1837. The two met later that same year in Concord, where Emerson lived. Thoreau so impressed Emerson with his poetic and profound nature writing that he invited him to move in with him and his wife. Thoreau lived with the couple, doing odd jobs and tutoring Emerson's children, until he relocated to his cabin in Walden Woods, on Emerson's property, in 1845. His first-person account of his close-to-nature existence became *Walden or My Life in the Woods* (1854).

Unlike Emerson, Thoreau thoroughly rejected society, which is just as well. For, also unlike Emerson, his writing, though mostly well received by critics, did not garner him material wealth, popularity, or notoriety during his lifetime. Aside from the occasional political tumult caused by his stoic stance against slavery, war, and governmental injustice, he remained largely unknown until a generation after his death, at the age of forty-five.

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Objectives

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

1. define Transcendentalism, and explain how it is expressed in each essay.
2. discuss the concepts of self-reliance and civil disobedience.
3. explain the differences between isolation and the search for solitude as an aid to spiritual enlightenment.
4. analyze the role of Nature plays in Transcendentalism.
5. identify and discuss the elements of Transcendentalism that have inspired controversy.
6. write an original epigram, after locating examples of epigrams within the essays.
7. discuss the relationship between nonconformity and participation in a democracy.
8. recognize the use of anecdotal storytelling.
9. scrutinize critical passages of the essays, and extract the central themes and underlying ideas.
10. cite examples of Biblical, literary, and historical allusion.
11. infer Thoreau's motivation for moving to Walden Woods.
12. compare the time in which the authors lived with the present, and explain why the essays remain relevant.
13. analyze how shifts in tone and point of view affect the essays.
14. describe the connection between imagery and the authors' ideas.
15. identify and discuss the legacy of the Transcendentalists.

Walden or Life in the Woods

Higher Laws

1. Contrast Thoreau's desire to devour a woodchuck at the opening of his essay, with his vegetarian tendency that is revealed later on. What does this duality represent?
2. According to Thoreau, how do one's thoughts, actions, and aspirations affect one's physical features? How does his opinion contradict the old adage that you cannot judge a book by its cover? Do you think one can interpret his remarks literally?
3. Write an essay in which you interpret Thoreau's remark, "The gross feeder is a man in the larva state; and there are whole nations in that condition, nations without fancy or imagination, whose vast abdomens betray them." Is his remark a political one? How is his remark applicable today?
4. What are the differences, according to Thoreau, between vigor, vitality, health, and purity? How is being physically healthy different from being pure?
5. Analyze Thoreau's anecdote about John Farmer. Whom does Farmer represent? What is the purpose of the anecdote? What meaning can one glean from it? What concept is Thoreau attempting to convey?

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Self-Reliance

Vocabulary

abide – to remain or remain strong
aboriginal – original; primal
absolve – to clear from blame or obligation
admonition – a scolding or warning
affinity – a liking
amelioration – improvement
arduous – difficult; laborious
asinine – ridiculous
askance – sideways, implying disapproval or distrust
atheism – the denial of the existence of God
aversion – an avoidance
bantling – [*archaic*] a baby
bard – a poet
begirt – [*archaic*] encircled
benevolence – goodwill
bereave – to rob
bestowed – given
bivouac – [*archaic*] an all-night vigil; modern definition is a temporary camp
capitulate – to surrender
chagrins – embarrasses
churlish – sullen
complacency – contentedness
conciliate – to plead for
conviction – a strong belief
covenants – binding agreements
cumbers – burdens
deprecate – to deplore or belittle
desponding – despairing
dilapidated – run-down; deteriorated
disapprobation – disapproval
disconcerted – confused or shaken
disdain – scorn
disencumbering – relieving
éclat – brilliance or excellence
eloquent – showing grace in speaking
eminent – outstanding; famous

10. What Buddhist philosophy does Thoreau echo regarding the illusory nature of reality?

11. How does the authorial tone of *Where I Lived, and What I Lived For* change significantly by the end of the essay? How is the title of the essay indicative of the change?

6. According to Thoreau, how might Walden Pond have gotten its name?

7. List the ponds Thoreau describes in his essay.

8. Describe the tone of this essay.
