**Module: Study of Literary Texts**

**Lecture 02: Transcendentalism**

In the early to mid-nineteenth century, a philosophical movement known as Transcendentalism took root in America and evolved into a predominantly literary expression. The adherents to Transcendentalism believed that knowledge could be arrived at not just through the senses, but through intuition and contemplation of the internal spirit. As such, they professed skepticism of all established religions, believing that Divinity resided in the individual, and the mediation of a church was cumbersome to achieving enlightenment. The genesis of the movement can be accurately traced to 1836 and the first gathering of the Transcendental Club in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The father of the movement, an appellation he probably did not relish, was Ralph Waldo Emerson. Other prominent contributors included Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, William Henry Channing, and George Ripley. In the grand scheme, the Transcendentalist’s moment on the literary stage was decidedly brief. With Fuller’s death in 1850, one of the movement’s great advocates was silenced. Emerson lacked the vitality and desire to follow in her path. Though their hold on the public imagination was short-lived, the long-lasting influence that the Transcendentalists had on American literature cannot be denied. Even the philosophy’s critics were forced to acknowledge the effects that the Transcendental Movement had on the world, particularly the American experience of the world. For Transcendentalism was a distinctly American expression, with concerns and ideals that perhaps did not fully translate in England or Continental Europe. The philosophy was inexorably bound together with American’s expansionist impulse, as well as the troubling question of slavery and women’s place in society. A philosophical-literary movement cannot solve such problems, but it can provide the vocabulary to discuss them reasonably.

On the most basic level, Transcendentalism represented a new way of understanding truth and knowledge. The roots of the philosophy go back to Germany, specifically the writings and theories of Immanuel Kant. In contrast to the scientific revolutions which were daily adding to the store of facts, Kant concerned himself with the abstractions of existence – those things which cannot be known for sure. He argued that individuals have it in their power to reason for themselves whether a thing be true or not, and how to fit their reasoning into an overall view of the world. Kant set himself apart from those who believed the senses to be perfect measures of reality. He encouraged a healthy level of doubt and skepticism, but not to the point of nihilistic despair. Kant asserted that humans must embrace the fact that some things cannot be known with certainty, no matter how advanced science and technology become. Together with the spiritualism of Emanuel Swedenborg, a religious mystic gathering a large following in Western Europe, American intellectuals had the ingredients for a philosophical mélange that blended a powerful idealism with Puritanical humility and work ethic.

In addition to their heady philosophical forebears, the Transcendentalists owed a great debt to the English Romantics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Many distinctly Romantic tropes echo through the pages of Transcendental literature. Obviously, the predilection to turn to the natural world for intimations of truth was a recurrent theme for the Romantics. In Transcendental philosophy, the grind of ordinary life and society are seen as barriers between the self and the spirit. Thus, Nature presents a way to free the mind of its typical distractions. The very word “transcend” connotes moving beyond some stultifying condition of mind or body. Another strongly Romantic concept that the Transcendentalists embraced was the renewed potency and potentiality of the individual. Specifically, the imagination was glorified as one of the defining, almost divine characteristics of consciousness. Through imagination, the human mind could extend itself in ways that had never been considered. Transcendentalists differed somewhat from the Romantics in that they ultimately wanted to effect change, both personally and globally. Romanticism, generally speaking, was too much preoccupied with the ego and aesthetics to work for change in the real world. This newly enlightened, transcendent individual could go into the world and work to make it a better place. The Transcendental Movement was nothing if not idealist.

Not surprisingly, the conflation of German philosophy and English Romanticism transplanted on American soil produced something quite original. The fact that the United States was still such a young nation, still seeking out her borders, had a powerful impact on the literature being produced. Emerson and his contemporaries saw a nation on the brink of discovering its own voice. Until that time, American literature had merely replicated the fashions of Europe. There was precious little originality or innovation. Furthermore, the cultural hub of the new nation was firmly rooted New England. The remainder of the continent was still rather a wild place, where surviving was a more pressing concern than producing high art or pondering the day’s big questions. The Transcendentalists saw an opportunity to make a break with England and forge a new literature for a new continent. That literature would be bold and expressive, and a bit wild, like the land itself.

If the Transcendental Movement had a founding father, then he was most certainly Ralph Waldo Emerson. However, he only reluctantly adopted the role of figurehead. He mostly preferred to remain behind the scenes, observing the action but not participating. Emerson was a man of deep faith, though in his personal life he was struck down more than once by tragedy. His first wife Ellen Tucker died of tuberculosis after just two years of marriage. The loss was deeply felt by Emerson. He later remarried, only to lose the first child of that marriage to illness as well. Such tragedies naturally came to inform Emerson’s way of seeing the world. Despite such ample experience of the dark side of life, Emerson managed to carry forward with a sort of resolute stoicism, if not optimism. At Harvard Divinity School’s 1836 Commencement, he delivered an oration that would become the foundational document of New England Transcendentalism. In “The American Scholar,” Emerson beckoned for a new kind of spirit to take root in humanity, a spirit fueled by individualism, creativity, and a tireless work ethic. That Emerson’s idealized scholar was “American” is not by accident. The belief that the young nation was fertile ground for a new and more enlightened kind of citizen was quite popular at the time. The Puritan forebears planted the seed of American exceptionalism, which grew fast and strong in the intellectual atmosphere of nineteenth century New England.

In sharp contrast to the sober calculation of Ralph Waldo Emerson is the life and work of Henry David Thoreau. Not content to simply muse and write about the new way of thinking, Thoreau sought to live the Transcendental life to its fullest potential. He spent two years living in a self-built cabin on Walden Pond on land that belonged to Emerson. His goal was to simplify his existence, get back in tune with the natural world, and have more freedom to write and meditate. Thoreau would later recount his experience in *Walden, or Life in the Woods*. By far his most famous work, [*Walden*](http://www.online-literature.com/thoreau/walden/)is part autobiography and part rambling essay. He anticipates stream of consciousness narratives, while laying the foundation for later forms of social activism and naturalistic living. While living on Walden Pond, Thoreau was arrested and spent a night in jail for tax evasion. He argued that his political beliefs forbade him from supporting the government through taxes. The experience of his arrest served as the inspiration for an essay which would later be known as [*Civil Disobedience*](http://www.online-literature.com/thoreau/441/). In the essay, Thoreau outlines the justification and even the responsibility of citizens to peacefully resist the government’s power whenever that power reached too far.

The individualist politics of Henry David Thoreau sometimes earned him the label of anarchist. He was vehemently anti-slavery his whole life, though he also opposed warfare as a kind of barbarity. Though no one can know for certain, it is probable that Thoreau was chaste his entire life. From many corners, he was decried as cowardly in his retreat from the normal flow of life. For Thoreau, retreating to the isolation of Walden was absolutely necessary for his creative impulses to flourish. He was firm in his beliefs, which he arrived at through steady and careful reasoning. More than any other intellectual, Thoreau put into practice many of the basic assumptions of the Transcendentalist way of thinking. At Walden Pond, he lived almost entirely on what the land would provide for him. He communicated little with the outside world, despite the fact that he was only a few miles from civilization. It is a fair criticism that Thoreau’s expression of Transcendentalist philosophy was impractical. Not everyone can retreat into solitude for years at a time. Society would grind to a halt were the whole world to go on leave. However, the literary output that Walden Pond allowed for is a landmark in American philosophy.

Ralph Waldo Emerson may have been the father of the Transcendental Movement, but Margaret Fuller had arguably as much influence on its development as anyone else. Emerson was somewhat reluctant to attach his name to progressive political initiatives. He reportedly turned down invitations to speak at abolitionist meetings. It was not that Emerson disagreed with such political and social ends; rather, he simply lacked the necessary egotism to take the lead of those movements. Fuller, on the other hand, was unabashed in her support of abolition, women’s rights, and overall social equality. Easily the most important contribution Fuller made for the Transcendental Movement was in her publishing ventures. With some support from Emerson, Fuller was the main publisher behind *The Dial*, which ran from 1840 to 1844. A journal devoted to printing the work of prominent Transcendentalists, *The Dial* holds a place of high esteem in the history of American letters. Despite its short run, Fuller and Emerson’s joint venture was influential and formative for an entire generation of up and coming writers. More than any other collection of documents, the publication history of *The Dial* reveals the heart, soul, and mind of the Transcendental Movement.

The Transcendentalists were not without their critics. Edgar Allen Poe referred to them as “Frogpondians” and repeatedly mocked their writing. Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was marginally associated with the movement, eventually developed distaste for their utopian idealism. He wrote a satirical novel, [*The Blithedale Romance*](http://www.online-literature.com/thoreau/441/), based largely on his experience at Brook Farm, a Transcendentalist utopian commune. On the political front, Transcendentalists were frequently the targets of ridicule for their abolitionist beliefs and generally pacifist stance on national affairs. More than anything, they were accused of lacking concrete ideas, instead dwelling in a foggy abstract world of their own creation. This criticism is not without merit. However, the lasting impact of the Transcendentalist philosophy testifies to the influence of the philosophy. Emerson’s essays alone represent a broad slice of the intellectual climate of 1830s New England. With his grandiose themes and national idealism, Emerson extended the limit of the essay form. Henry David Thoreau contributed his own wit and clarity to the body of Transcendental literature. The death of Margaret Fuller took much of the steam from the Transcendental Movement. Coupled with the growing unease over slavery and the economy, the intellectual climate simply no longer supported the high-minded idealism of the Transcendentalists. Everyone sensed that the nation was headed towards a cataclysm that a quasi-philosophical literary movement was in no position to avert. Emerson’s oratorical prowess could not resolve the slavery question, nor could Thoreau’s primitivism supply an antidote to the heedless western expansion of the frontier. Writers growing up in the shadow of Transcendentalism largely reacted against its unbridled optimism. Nathaniel Hawthorne in particular saw the world through a very different lens. Where Emerson saw limitless potential and a growing confidence, Hawthorne saw doubt, mistakes, and the darker side of human nature struggling towards the surface. Of course, Hawthorne would not have produced the literature that he did without the influence of the Transcendental Movement. It is often those ideas and philosophies that an author most vehemently discards that come to inform their work most strongly. Although Transcendentalism in its proper sense did not last much into the 1850s, American literature as a whole saw a revival that may not have been possible without the inspiration of Emerson, Thoreau, and their ilk. The decade or so before the Civil War has in the last century come to be known as the American Renaissance. The literary productions of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman shifted the balance of power in English literature away from the British Isles and towards the United States. The new American literature was bold, fresh, and young. It encompassed the sweep of the prairies and the energies of the explorers. Not everything was glory and progress, however. Social historians look back today and see that other cultures suffered at the hands of American settlers and American industry. For their time, the Transcendentalists were remarkably attuned to the needs and interests of non-white persons, namely Native Americans and African Americans. They spoke in favor of women’s rights and abolition, and encouraged protest against the government when its actions disagreed with the common good. In the realm of art, Transcendentalism was the intellectual fuel that stoked the fires of American literature for years to come.