

MA English Semester IV

Course: American Literature
Course Code: END 020

American Transcendentalism

Unit I

ABOUT THE MOVEMENT

- ▶ **Transcendentalism** is a religious and philosophical movement
- ▶ Developed during the late **1820s and '30s** in the Eastern region of the United States
- ▶ As a **protest against the general state of spirituality** and, in particular, the state of intellectualism at Harvard University and the doctrine of the Unitarian church as taught at Harvard Divinity School

ABOUT THE MOVEMENT

- ▶ A philosophy of self-reliance and individualism
- ▶ Both qualities are traits treasured by American Frontier Society
- ▶ Transcendentalists believed in the idea of Utopia
- ▶ In 1841 the Transcendentalist Club founded Brook Farm, a utopian society of communal living—all shared in the work, and in the profits
- ▶ Two members left disillusioned—Nathaniel Hawthorne and Margaret Fuller

SIGNIFICANCE

- ▶ Strongly believes in the inherent **goodness of both people and nature**
- ▶ Asserts that society and its institutions—particularly organized **religion** and **political parties**—ultimately **corrupt the purity of the individual**
- ▶ Transcendentalism evolved as an organic consequence of the Unitarian emphasis on **free conscience and the value of intellectual reason**

UNIQUENESS OF THE MOVEMENT

- ▶ Transcendentalism believed that knowledge could be arrived at not just through the senses, but through **intuition and contemplation of the internal spirit**
- ▶ 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**
- ▶ Transcendentalism has been influenced by **Indian religions**

INFLUENCES

- ▶ Transcendentalism also takes the Romantic view of man's steady degeneration from childhood to adulthood as he is corrupted by culture: “**A man is a god in ruins**”
- ▶ 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

CRITICISM

- ▶ 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* 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

- 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.

MAJOR WRITERS OF THE TRANSCENDENTALIST MOVEMENT

- ▶ Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1803-1882)
- ▶ Thoreau, Henry David (1817-1862)
- ▶ Fuller, Margaret (1810-1850)
- ▶ Channing, William Henry (1810-1884)
- ▶ Ripley, George (1802-1880)
- ▶ Dickinson, Emily (1830-1886)
- ▶ Whitman, Walt (1819-1892)
- ▶ Very, Jones (1813-1880)
- ▶ Alcott, Amos Bronson (1799-1888)
- ▶ Francis, Convers (1795-1863)
- ▶ Peabody, Elizabeth (1804-1894)
- ▶ Hedge, Frederick Henry (1805-1890)

THE THREE BIG ISSUES

There were three major issues during the time of transcendentalism:

1. Women's Rights
2. Governmental indifference toward Native Americans
3. Slavery—This was the number 1 issue of the era, and abolishing slavery was a top priority of transcendentalists

Transcendentalism—its influence today

Transcendentalist writings and art continue to affect 20th century writers

It continues to reverberate through American life with messages of:

Confident self identity

Spiritual progress

Social justice

Aesthetics

All are a celebration of the grandeur of the American Soul

- **Live life to the fullest**
- **Individualism**
- **Be your own mentor/ self teaching**
- **Simplicity**
- **Do not worship the material**
- **Be one with God**
- **Moral values**
- **Nature is sacred**
- **Society corrupts individual's inherent goodness**

BASIC TENETS/FEATURES

TRANSCENDENTALISM