The Transcendentalists
Reflections of the Divine in Everyday Life
What Was Transcendentalism?

Transcendentalism was a nineteenth-century philosophical movement. Transcendentalists believed that true reality transcends, or exists beyond, the physical world.

Great men are they who see that spiritual is stronger than any material force; that thoughts rule the world.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson
Basic Beliefs of Transcendentalism

• Everything in the world, including people, is a reflection of God, or the Divine Soul.
• The physical world is a doorway to the spiritual world.
• People can use intuition to see God in nature and in their own souls.
• A person—not society, the church, or government—is his or her own best authority.
• Feeling and intuition are superior to reason and intellect.
The Roots of Transcendentalism

A. Idealism (Greece, 4th century B.C.)
B. Puritanism (North America, 17th century)
C. Romanticism (Europe and North America, late 18th century through mid-19th century)
D. Transcendentalism (North America, 19th century)
Idealism

Idealism was a philosophy explained by the Greek philosopher Plato in the 4th century B.C. Idealists believed that true reality could be found in ideas rather than in the physical world.
Idealism and Transcendentalism

Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed that Transcendentalism was simply Idealism rediscovered and applied to the nineteenth-century world.

• Transcendentalists shared Plato’s belief in an all-encompassing spiritual reality.
• They applied Idealist ideas to human life, believing in human perfectibility and working to achieve that goal.
Puritanism

Puritanism was an early American religious philosophy. The Puritans believed that

- religion is a personal, inner experience that should not be filtered through clergy or government
- people should be self-reliant
- God’s presence reveals itself primarily through the Bible, but also through signs in the physical world
- human salvation is reserved for a few “elect” people—the majority of humanity is destined to damnation
Puritanism and Transcendentalism

• Transcendentalists shared the Puritan beliefs in the personal nature of religion and the desirability of self-reliance.

• However, Transcendentalists differed because they
  • looked to nature, not the Bible, as a primary source of divine revelation
  • believed that all humans, not just the “elect,” were connected to a divine source
Romanticism

Romanticism was a school of thought that began in late eighteenth-century Europe and spread to America in the nineteenth century. The Romantics

• valued imagination, feeling, and nature over reason, logic, and civilization
• championed individualism
• reflected on nature to gain spiritual wisdom
Romanticism and Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism was one of the faces of American Romanticism.

- Transcendentalists took the Romantic belief that spiritual wisdom could be found in nature one step further—they believed that everything in the physical world, including human beings, is a reflection of God.
- The Transcendentalists believed that because human beings are a part of the Divine Soul, they are capable of perfection.
Belief in Action

Because Transcendentalists believed in the possibility of human perfection, they

• pursued practical goals for improving people’s lives
• developed plans for creating a perfect, or utopian, society
• worked for social change
Ralph Waldo Emerson

Emerson was the best-known Transcendentalist. He

• was a highly influential writer, lecturer, and social reformer
• lectured and wrote extensively on Transcendental ideas
• was admired by and influenced other writers and artists, including Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman
Emerson’s Optimism

Optimism, or positive thinking, was an important part of Emerson’s transcendentalist view. He believed that

• because God is good, all natural events and experiences, even death and disaster, can be explained on a spiritual level

• we can know God directly through the power of our intuition

• by trusting our own power to know God directly, we will see that we, too, are a part of the Divine Soul
What Have You Learned?

1. The transcendentalists believed that reality existed more in ideas than in physical things.
   a. true b. false

2. Emerson was a critic of transcendentalism.
   a. true b. false

3. Transcendentalists had nothing in common with the Puritans.
   a. true b. false
The End