

It is in every form a protest against usage, and a search for principles. —R. W. Emerson

If I were a Bostonian, I think I would be a Transcendentalist. —Charles Dickens

EN 8553

Studies in American Literature to the Civil War: The Transcendentalists

Thursdays, 3:00-6:00

Dr. Bonnie O'Neill

The Transcendentalist movement concentrated in the Boston area from about 1836 to 1850. While it originated in a theological disagreement over Unitarianism, it grew beyond this localized conflict to incorporate an attitude of inquiry among a group of fellow-feeling men and women. In the largest sense, Transcendentalists were guided by the question Emerson asks at the beginning of his essay "Fate": "How shall I live?" The Transcendentalists sought to reconcile science and religion, reason and sentiment; they aimed to recalibrate moral principles with the circumstances of modernity. And they did so, most often, through writing. The class will examine works by many writers in an array of forms, but with an emphasis on leading figures such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller; as a secondary focus, we may look at Dickinson and Whitman, two major interpreters of Transcendentalism. We will trace key themes of the movement, including religion, nature, individualism, and social reform, and we will attend to the cultural circumstances that shaped the texts and their writers.

Required Texts:

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays and Poems* (Library of America College Ed.)

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Blithedale Romance* (Oxford)

Myerson, Joel. *Transcendentalism: A Reader* (Oxford)

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden* (Yale), *Civil Disobedience and Other Essay* (Dover)



The "transparent eyeball," caricature by Christopher Cranch, ca. 1839.