

Transcendentalism – a primer

In New England, an intellectual movement known as transcendentalism developed as an American version of romanticism. The movement began among an influential set of authors based in Concord, Massachusetts, and was led by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Like romanticism, transcendentalism rejected both 18th-century rationalism and established religion, which for the transcendentalists meant the Puritan tradition in particular. Instead, the transcendentalists celebrated the power of the human imagination to commune with the universe and **transcend** the limitations of the material world.

The transcendentalists found their chief source of inspiration in nature. Emerson's essay, *Nature* (1836) was the first major document of the transcendental school and stated the ideas that were to remain central to it. His other key transcendentalist works include *The American Scholar* (1837), a volume in which he addressed the intellectual's duty to culture, and "Self-Reliance" (1841), an essay in which he asserted the importance of being true to one's own nature.

Henry David Thoreau, a friend and protégé of Emerson's, put transcendentalist ideas into action. *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854) is his journal of a two-year experiment in living as simply and self-reliantly as possible in a small hut that he built on the shores of Walden Pond, near Concord.

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