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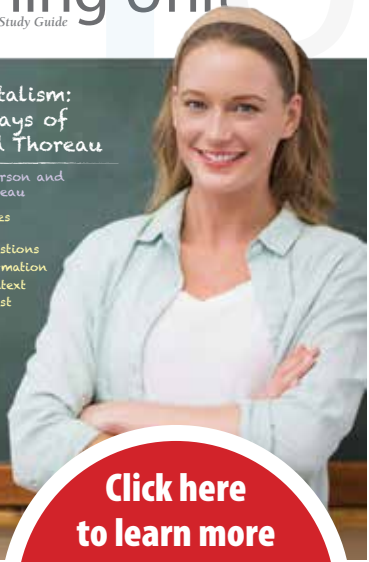
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Transcendentalism: Essential Essays of Emerson and Thoreau

by Ralph Waldo Emerson and
Henry David Thoreau

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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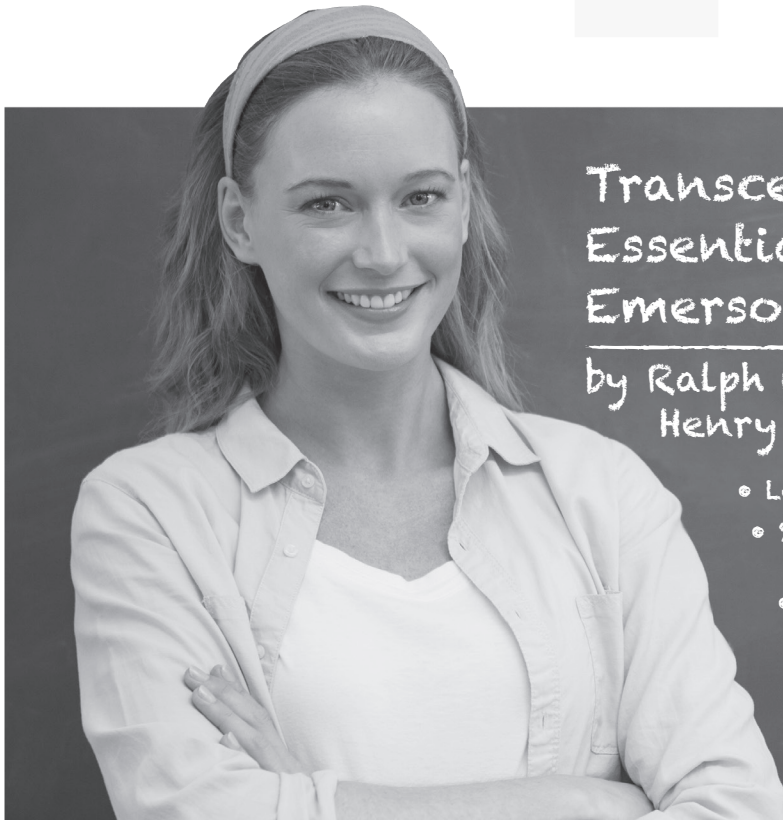
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Transcendentalism: Essential Essays of Emerson & Thoreau

Background Information

“The Transcendentalist adopts the whole connection of spiritual doctrine. He believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy.” – **Ralph Waldo Emerson**, *The Transcendentalist*

“In all things of nature, there is something of the marvelous.” – **Aristotle**

When people hear the word *Transcendentalism*, they tend to equate its meaning with its root, *transcend*, meaning “to rise above the human experience.” In fact, though, the philosophy of Transcendentalism actually refers to that which is within the human mind. It refers to the innate ability within all people to fulfill their potential, to overcome adversity, to face challenges directly, to rely on an inner voice and instinct to guide them through life. Listening to the inner voice, the Transcendentalist, at one with God and Nature, grows into an autonomous, self-reliant individual who feels no need to seek affirmation outside of him or herself.

American Transcendentalism began as a combination of Unitarian theology—including the belief that God is one, rather than the Catholic “trinity”—and German philosophy in the mid-1800s. The Industrial Revolution was bringing rapid change to the country. A new materialism distracted Americans in vast numbers. Being a good citizen meant abiding by laws that were not always moral or right. For example, in a blend of greed, commerce, and immoral law, the federal government decreed in the Fugitive Slave Laws that slaves who managed to escape to the North were still property and must be returned to their owners.

Transcendentalists, including Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, spoke out against such injustice. Their contemporaries, including Hawthorne and Poe, often viewed them as radical nonconformists. Thoreau and Emerson used *The Dial* magazine, founded by women’s rights activist Margaret Fuller, as a platform to speak about such topics as equal rights for women, the abolishment of slavery, the rights and responsibilities of the individual, and the injustices perpetrated in the name of Democracy.

The Transcendentalists valued individuality above social acceptance and creativity above financial prosperity. More controversial, however, was their belief that the Divine existed within Nature and that man existed above the traditional deity of organized religion, which they believed inspired fear and condemnation of self and of others. The movement also valued personal vision and truth above external reality, and its proponents believed in experiential education to heighten innate curiosity, rather than the rote memorization and drilling employed by public schools.

Most Transcendentalists became unhappy with social and political developments of the day. As a group, they developed and honed a powerful political voice, which can be seen as a forerunner of and inspiration to the Environmental Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the fight for women’s rights, and the struggle to end wars through peaceful protest. The Transcendentalists helped define the spirit of American individualism and independence.

Transcendentalism: Essential Essays of Emerson & Thoreau

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define Transcendentalism, and explain how it is expressed in each essay.
2. discuss the concepts of self-reliance and civil disobedience.
3. explain the differences between isolation and the search for solitude as an aid to spiritual enlightenment.
4. analyze the role of Nature plays in Transcendentalism.
5. identify and discuss the elements of Transcendentalism that have inspired controversy.
6. write an original epigram, after locating examples of epigrams within the essays.
7. discuss the relationship between nonconformity and participation in a democracy.
8. recognize the use of anecdotal storytelling.
9. scrutinize critical passages of the essays, and extract the central themes and underlying ideas.
10. cite examples of Biblical, literary, and historical allusion.
11. infer Thoreau's motivation for moving to Walden Woods.
12. compare the time in which the authors lived with the present, and explain why the essays remain relevant.
13. analyze how shifts in tone and point of view affect the essays.
14. describe the connection between imagery and the authors' ideas.
15. identify and discuss the legacy of the Transcendentalists.

Transcendentalism:

Essential Essays of Emerson & Thoreau

Questions for Essay and Discussion

Self-Reliance

1. When it was first published, some readers found *Self-Reliance* quite controversial. Why do you think that is? What elements of the essay might some of today's readers find unacceptable?
2. Emerson encourages isolation, but cautions that it “must not be mechanical, but spiritual, that is, must be elevation.” Explain what you think he means by a solitude or isolation that elevates. He also writes that one must keep the independence of solitude even in the midst of the crowd. What do you think he means? Write a descriptive essay about the “perfect sweetness” of Emersonian solitude.
3. Emerson writes often of God and alludes to scripture just as often; however, he also refers to the Divinity within, the Divinity of Nature, and answering only to the law of his nature. Are these thoughts contradictory? Do you think Emerson is more Christian, agnostic, Buddhist, pagan, or, as some said in his day, atheistic in his views? Infer Emerson's religious views based on what you have read in *Self-Reliance*.
4. In *Self-Reliance*, Emerson condemns conformity by writing, “[I]mitation is suicide.” Do you agree? When is it necessary in life to imitate others? How do artists in any media (sculptors, painters, writers) disprove this statement?
5. Do you think Emerson is against formal schooling or regimented education? Examine *Self-Reliance* in light of this question, and support your answer from the text.
6. Many scholars debate what Emerson means by the term *self-reliance*. Some say he is referring to reliance on the Divinity within oneself, the innate spiritual instinct that directs us to do what is right and good; others say he is referring to rugged individualism, and being able to make one's way in the world without depending on anyone else. What do you think? Cite examples from the essay to support your opinion.
7. In *Self-Reliance*, Emerson writes, “I would write on the lintels of the doorpost, *Whim*.” Explain this Biblical allusion from the book of *Exodus*. What idea is Emerson trying to convey?

sect – a group
shriven – absolved
sovereign – self-governing, supreme; someone who exercises authority;
squalid – dirty; wretched; repulsive
sycophantic – flattering; following worshipfully
titular – existing in title only
trifles – things of little value and/or importance
vagabond – wandering
venerable – worthy of respect and reverence
whimsical – fanciful; silly

1. Who wrote the essay *Self-Reliance*, and what do you know about the author?

2. What does the essay reveal about the author?

3. Provide an example of a Biblical allusion from this essay.

4. How does the author feel about traveling, and how does he reveal those feelings?

5. How does the author feel about religion, and how does he express that opinion?

1. Who wrote *Civil Disobedience*, and what do you know about the author?

2. To what particular event was the author responding when he wrote *Civil Disobedience*?

3. How does the author think citizens should respond to injustice perpetrated by their government?

4. Why is the author critical of government by the majority?

5. Why does the author reference Daniel Webster? Is the author's view of him complimentary or critical?

6. What is the author's view on slavery, and what action does he recommend?

7. According to the author, what are a person's responsibilities toward society?

Transcendentalism:

Essential Essays of Emerson & Thoreau

Walden or Life in the Woods: Higher Laws

Vocabulary

contriving – inventing
ebriosity – [archaic] drunkenness
gluttonous – greedy
heathen – a person who has not been exposed to Christianity
imbrute – to make brutal
insectivorous – feeding on insects
intangible – unable to be physically touched or understood
intimation – a suggestion
moiling – laboring; slaving
omnipresent – everywhere; present in all places
ornithology – the study of birds
prostrate – lying flat with the face down
reposes – reclines or relaxes
repugnance – a dislike; disgust
scullion – a low kitchen servant
scurf – the outer crust
sloth – laziness
venison – deer meat or other wild game
viand – a piece of food
voracious – ravenous; extremely hungry
wantonly – without restraint

1. According to Thoreau, what are the two sides of man's dual nature? How does he feel about each side?

2. At the beginning of *Higher Laws*, Thoreau describes his lust for meat, but later decries meat eating as unclean. To what does he attribute his growing distaste?
