Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism - transcend - go beyond what is normally thought

Emerson and Thoreau are the main authors of this movement

Emerson
• Emerson speaks in profound statements of truth.
• Says America has to find it's own way.
• (Says you should go beyond the surface.)
• The Trilogy of Essays
  o Self-Reliance
  o The American Scholar
  o The Divinity School Address
• Many believe that these essays are equivalent to the US Constitution.
• He believes that if we create a literature, something new and original - then will be identifiable as American.
  o **Self Reliance**
    ▪ Says people live a conventional life
      • For us school is convention - institution
    ▪ Emerson proposes a radical proposition - says religion shackles (limits you), it limits what you can do in life
    ▪ Says rebellions are convention, not original
    ▪ Most people do what’s expected of them
    ▪ People need to reform - break away from traditions, break away from the pack
      ▪ “You are living a boring life”
    ▪ “Self-Reliance” is a call to your conscience not to be afraid. Your conscience is right if you clear away distractions.
      ▪ Life is filled with distractions
    ▪ Majority opinions scare the heck out of Americans - majority is usually wrong
    ▪ Freedom from convention - your life, not life someone else wants you to live
    ▪ You can figure out what you want in life - the only place to it is alone in nature.
  o **American Scholar**
    ▪ Culture needs to find its own voice
    ▪ Culture defines (the voice of) society
  o **The Divinity School Address**
    ▪ Addresses Graduates at Harvard
    ▪ Tells them that Jesus Christ is there to help guide you
      ▪ You can’t expect to think on the level of Christ
      ▪ Said if you asked step by step what he did, it is too rigid -
could become a robot:
  o Be careful “Religion can force you into straight-jackets”

- Emerson is very optimistic.
- Major philosophy is transcendentalism.
- Transcendentalism is that there is a spirit that will take you beyond the surface of things.
- Spirit for some people is God, for some found in nature
- Daily routine is to satisfy the senses.
  o Emerson said there is something more noble in life that lasts longer than satisfying the senses—satisfies longer like:
    ▪ Love
    ▪ Honor
    ▪ Truth
    ▪ Respect
- Emerson was a Unitarian - believed there is one God - not Trinity (Mother, Father, Holy Spirit)
  o Unitarians believed Jesus was a man, not a God, and he may have been a Prophet.
  o At the time, Harvard was largely Unitarian.
- Transcendentalists
  o Were a bunch of young Americans in the early 19th Century - were excited and intoxicated by new literature
    1. Romantic Movement - England - Nature
    2. Romantic Movement - colonies (Poe, Melville, etc.)
    3. Orient - Asian, Eastern Philosophy, and Germans too.
  o Disgruntled teenagers against father’s thinking - thought older generation was too strict, defined / limiting - didn’t tell enough about world.
  o “Corpse cold Unitarianism” - Emerson
  o Thoreau wrote “Civil Disobedience” and experiences in “Walden”
  o Children of puritan past
  o Forced by Unitarianism
  o Find religious expression in this new idea.
  o Emerson says - If you are looking for happiness, its there, just get rid of distractions in life - happiness is in nature.
  o He says happiness isn’t in the senses - but in instincts (Intuition) - spirit will guide you - not in institution like school - too many distractions
  o Puritanically people were fascinated w/ ideal place - Utopia - some Utopian communities were created
  o People became more interior
  o Reality will respond to what you put on it.
  o Never a formalized movement
Did 2 things

1. Vocally Persuasive (Charismatic) - Specifically Emerson and Thoreau.

2. Very Active - activities fit into a pattern

- People outside their circle considered their things (lectures, etc) a movement, even some called it a conspiracy.
- Don’t get one formal document, but an outcry against the materialistic pressures of a business civilization.
- Were protestant to the core - Unitarian
- Protestant ethic that they rebelled against -> supposed to labor in a proper calling
- Refused to labor in a proper calling - ministry, follow rules, politician, theologian, student, merchant.
- Instead they cultivated arts and leisure (loaf/relax)
- Emerson believes there isn’t enough time for leisure
  1. CULTIVATED THE ART OF LEISURE.
  2. Avoided making any money
  3. Has a place in our intellectual history.
- There are always people that are against - rebel
- Historians believe Transcendentalism is our Romantic Movement (Europe) - in our Arts and Leisure
- Writings of Emerson and Thoreau explained the deepest philosophical ideas at the moment.

Dif. Levels at Which People Will Study Transcendentalism

/ Definition of Trans.
1. Political implications
2. Ethical Implications
3. Aesthetic Implication - pleasing to the eye
4. Religious
5. Philosophical - goes beyond Locke - believes all knowledge comes from outside than through senses goes into you.
   - Transcendentalists say knowledge is from inside - get from outside - Nature.
   - ALL NATURE IS ALREADY INSIDE YOU
   - Emerson calls this whim/ the over-soul
     1. Creative force that we all have
   - Thoreau: Blades of Grass puts things in perspective - own life cycle - only way you can do this is loaf.
   - Thoreau: People use leaf as symbol of life - spirit of life -> most ripe when stop growing and start dying - never return to that state.
     1. Trying to achieve ripeness in life.
   - The true poetry of life is if you achieve ripeness.
   - Everything in nature is driven by the same thing.