Ralph Waldo Emerson

He was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1803. His father was a Unitarian minister and his mother was strong Anglican, so religion was a strong component of his childhood. At the age of 14, he entered Harvard College. His main interest during this university years was the study of Eastern cultures and religions. After Harvard, he devoted himself to become a Unitarian minister. His main intellectual mentors were Achille Murat (Napoleon’s nephew) and his aunt Mary Moodie Emerson. The latter introduced him into the reading of classical literature as well as romantics like Wordsworth and Carlyle.

In 1829, he married Ellen Tucker but she died two years after their marriage. This loss leads him to question his beliefs. He began to question his Christian doctrines and finally, in 1832, he resigned from the ministry. In 1833, he toured Europe. During this journey, two main events marked his future literary career:

* The first one was to visit Jussieu’s natural collection in Paris. This visit reinforced his Pantheist beliefs.
* The second one was meeting the contemporary English poets, such as Wordsworth, Carlyle and Coleridge. This led to the rejection of the European models and the adoption of an American independent literary style, the “American Originality”.

During the 1830s he became an independent literary man. He published his masterwork “*Nature*” in 1836 where he established some of the Transcendentalist principles. He reinforced these principles in his “*Boston Divinity School Adress*” of 1838 as well as in the famous essay “*Self-Reliance*” in 1841. During the last years of his life, his main interest was non-Western philosophy and culture, especially Oriental ones, such as Indian or Persian. In spite of his old age, he travelled to Egypt in 1872. He died at his home in Concord, the 27 April 1882.

**The Transcendental Club:**

The day before the publication of “Nature”, Emerson met Frederic Henry Hedge, George Putnam and George Ripley to plan periodic gatherings of other like-minded intellectuals. This was the beginning of the Transcendental Club, which served as a centre for the movement. The name was given to the group by the public and not by its participants. Hedge, a member, wrote: “*There was no club in the strict sense… only occasional meetings of like-minded men and women*”. The club was a meeting-place for these young thinkers and an organization ground for their idealistic frustration with the general state of American culture and society at the time.

**Works:**

“*Nature*”: published in 1836, this essay contains some of the principles of the Transcendentalist movement, especially Pantheism and connection with Nature. It is influenced by different cosmopolitan sources: Romanticism and the writings of the Swedish philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg.

“*The American Scholar*”: this was a speech given, the 31 August 1837, to the Phi Beta Kappa society of Harvard College (oldest US academic honour society). The main points of this speech were: to reinforce the ideas presented in “*Nature*”, just published the year before, and to build an American identity, leaving behind the European models. He conceived the human being as a “Man Thinking”. This man Thinking, the scholar is influenced by three factors: nature, the past and the experience. He rejected the European influence as well as he defended the importance of conforming the “*American Originality*”, an independent, autonomous American cultural sphere.

“*Self-Reliance*”: published in 1841, it took shape over time, achieving its final status in 1844. This essay shows the principles of the main Transcendentalists feature: Self-Reliance. The main doctrine of the essay was to be oneself: rejecting history, religion and social form. These elements do not allow us to be who truly are. Humans must only obey their own intuitions and trust them, showing obedience only to nature itself. For Emerson, God is Nature.

Poetry:

The main topics of his poems were:

* Religion: mainly Pantheist conception of it, rejection of the Unitarianism thoughts.
* Eastern Philosophy and Culture: specially influenced by Hinduism and Persian traditions: “*Hamatreya*” (1846) under the pseudonym Brahma, a Hindu god; and Persian literature: “*Persian Poetry*” (1858).

Emerson liked to experiment with irregularities in rhythm, rhyme and line length. Some of his poems were published in the monthly magazine “*The Atlantic*”, like “*The Rhodora*” (1847) or “*Brahma*” (1857).

“*Concord Hymn*” (1837) in commemoration of the Battles of Lexington and Concord (1775).