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Transcendentalism early 1800s

By the end of this section, you will be able to: Explain the connection between evangelical Protestantism and the Second Great Awakening Describe the message of the transcendentalists Protestantism shaped the views of the vast majority of Americans in the antebellum years. The influence of religion only intensified during the decades before the Civil War, as religious camp meetings spread the word that people could bring about their own salvation, a direct contradiction to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. Alongside this religious fervor, transcendentalists advocated a more direct knowledge of the self and an emphasis on individualism. The writers and thinkers devoted to transcendentalism, as well as the reactions against it, created a trove of writings, an outpouring that has been termed the American Renaissance. The reform efforts of the antebellum era sprang from the Protestant revival fervor that found expression in what historians refer to as the Second Great Awakening. (The First Great Awakening of evangelical Protestantism had taken place in the 1730s and 1740s.) The Second Great Awakening emphasized an emotional religious style in which sinners grappled with their unworthy nature before concluding that they were born again, that is, turning away from their sinful past and devoting themselves to living a righteous, Christ-centered life. This emphasis on personal salvation, with its rejection of predestination (the Calvinist concept that God selected only a chosen few for salvation), was the religious embodiment of the Jacksonian celebration of the individual. Itinerant ministers preached the message of the awakening to hundreds of listeners at outdoors revival meetings (linkl). This 1819 engraving by Jacques Gerard shows a Methodist camp meeting. Revivalist camp meetings held by itinerant Protestant ministers became a feature of nineteenth-century American life. The burst of religious enthusiasm that began in Kentucky and Tennessee in the 1790s and early 1800s among Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians owed much to the uniqueness of the early decades of the republic. These years saw swift population growth, broad western expansion, and the rise of participatory democracy. These political and social changes made many people anxious, and the more egalitarian, emotional, and individualistic religious practices of the Second Great Awakening provided relief and comfort for Americans experiencing rapid change. The awakening soon spread to the East, where it had a profound impact on Congregationalists and Presbyterians. The thousands swept up in the movement believed in the possibility of creating a much better world. Many adopted millennialism, the fervent belief that the Kingdom of God would be established on earth and that God would reign on earth for a thousand years, characterized by harmony and Christian morality. Those drawn to the message of the Second Great Awakening yearned for stability, decency, and goodness in the new and turbulent American republic. The Second Great Awakening also brought significant changes to American culture. Church membership doubled in the years between 1800 and 1835. Several new groups formed to promote and strengthen the message of religious revival. The American Bible Society, founded in 1816, distributed Bibles in an effort to ensure that every family had access to the sacred text, while the American Sunday School Union, established in 1824, focused on the religious education of children and published religious materials specifically for young readers. In 1825, the American Tract Society formed with the goal of disseminating the Protestant revival message in a flurry of publications. Missionaries and circuit riders (ministers without a fixed congregation) brought the message of the awakening across the United States, including into the lives of slaves. The revival spurred many slaveholders to begin encouraging their slaves to become Christians. Previously, many slaveholders feared allowing their slaves to convert, due to a belief that Christians could not be enslaved and because of the fear that slaves might use Christian principles to oppose their enslavement. However, by the 1800s, Americans established a legal foundation for the enslavement of Christians. Also, by this time, slaveholders had come to believe that if slaves learned the “right” (that is, white) form of Christianity, then slaves would be more obedient and hardworking. Allowing slaves access to Christianity also served to ease the consciences of Christian slaveholders, who argued that slavery was divinely ordained, yet it was a faith that also required slaveholders to bring slaves to the “truth.” Also important to this era was the creation of African American forms of worship as well as African American churches such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first independent black Protestant church in the United States. Formed in the 1790s by Richard Allen, the African Methodist Episcopal Church advanced the African American effort to express their faith apart from white Methodists (linkl). Charles Grandison Finney (a) was one of the best-known ministers of the Second Great Awakening. Richard Allen (b) created the first separate African American church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, in the 1790s. In the Northeast, Presbyterian minister Charles Grandison Finney rose to prominence as one of the most important evangelicals in the movement (linkl). Born in 1792 in western New York, Finney studied to be a lawyer until 1821, when he experienced a religious conversion and thereafter devoted himself to revivals. He led revival meetings in New York and Pennsylvania, but his greatest success occurred after he accepted a ministry in Rochester, New York, in 1830. At the time, Rochester was a boomtown because the Erie Canal had brought a lively shipping business. The new middle class—an outgrowth of the Industrial Revolution—embraced Finney’s message. It fit perfectly with their understanding of themselves as people shaping their own destiny. Workers also latched onto the message that they too could control their salvation, spiritually and perhaps financially as well. Western New York gained a reputation as the “burned over district,” a reference to the intense flames of religious fervor that swept the area during the Second Great Awakening. Beginning in the 1820s, a new intellectual movement known as transcendentalism began to grow in the Northeast. In this context, to transcend means to go beyond the ordinary sensory world to grasp personal insights and gain appreciation of a deeper reality, and transcendentalists believed that all people could attain an understanding of the world that surpassed rational, sensory experience. Transcendentalists were critical of mainstream American culture. They reacted against the age of mass democracy in Jacksonian America—what Tocqueville called the “tyranny of majority”—by arguing for greater individualism against conformity. European romanticism, a movement in literature and art that stressed emotion over cold, calculating reason, also influenced transcendentalists in the United States, especially the transcendentalists’ celebration of the uniqueness of individual feelings. Ralph Waldo Emerson emerged as the leading figure of this movement (linkl). Born in Boston in 1803, Emerson came from a religious family. His father served as a Unitarian minister and, after graduating from Harvard Divinity School in the 1820s, Emerson followed in his father’s footsteps. However, after his wife died in 1831, he left the clergy. On a trip to Europe in 1832, he met leading figures of romanticism who rejected the hyper-rationalism of the Enlightenment, emphasizing instead emotion and the sublime. Ralph Waldo Emerson (a), shown here circa 1857, is considered the father of transcendentalism. This letter (b) from Emerson to Walt Whitman, another brilliant writer of the transcendentalist movement, demonstrates the closeness of a number of these writers. When Emerson returned home the following year, he began giving lectures on his romanticism-influenced ideas. In 1836, he published “Nature,” an essay arguing that humans can find their true spirituality in nature, not in the everyday bustling working world of Jacksonian democracy and industrial transformation. In 1841, Emerson published his essay “Self-Reliance,” which urged readers to think for themselves and reject the mass conformity and mediocrity he believed had taken root in American life. In this essay, he wrote, “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.” Demanding that his readers be true to themselves and not blindly follow a herd mentality, Emerson’s ideas dovetailed with those of the French aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote about the “tyranny of the majority” in his Democracy in America. Tocqueville, like Emerson, expressed concern that a powerful majority could overpower the will of individuals. Visit Emerson Central to read the full text of “Self-Reliance” by Ralph Waldo Emerson. How have Emerson’s ideas influenced American society? Emerson’s ideas struck a chord with a class of literate adults who also were dissatisfied with mainstream American life and searching for greater spiritual meaning. Many writers were drawn to transcendentalism, and they started to express its ideas through new stories, poems, essays, and articles. The ideas of transcendentalism were able to permeate American thought and culture through a prolific print culture, which allowed magazines and journals to be widely disseminated. Among those attracted to Emerson’s ideas was his friend Henry David Thoreau, whom he encouraged to write about his own ideas. Thoreau placed a special emphasis on the role of nature as a gateway to the transcendentalist goal of greater individualism. In 1848, Thoreau gave a lecture in which he argued that individuals must stand up to governmental injustice, a topic he chose because of his disgust over the Mexican-American War and slavery. In 1849, he published his lecture “Civil Disobedience” and urged readers to refuse to support a government that was immoral. In 1854, he published Walden; Or, Life in the Woods, a book about the two years he spent in a small cabin on Walden Pond near Concord, Massachusetts (linkl). Thoreau had lived there as an experiment in living apart, but not too far apart, from his conformist neighbors. Henry David Thoreau (a) argued that men had the right to resist authority if they deemed it unjust. “All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable.” Thoreau’s Walden, or, Life in the Woods (b) articulated his emphasis on the importance of nature as a gateway to greater individuality. Margaret Fuller also came to prominence as a leading transcendentalist and advocate for women’s equality. Fuller was a friend of Emerson and Thoreau, and other intellectuals of her day. Because she was a woman, she could not attend Harvard, as it was a male-only institution for undergraduate students until 1973. However, she was later granted the use of the library there because of her towering intellect. In 1840, she became the editor of The Dial, a transcendentalist journal, and she later found employment as a book reviewer for the New York Tribune newspaper. Tragically, in 1850, she died at the age of forty in a shipwreck off Fire Island, New York. Walt Whitman also added to the transcendentalist movement, most notably with his 1855 publication of twelve poems, entitled Leaves of Grass, which celebrated the subjective experience of the individual. One of the poems, “Song of Myself,” amplified the message of individualism, but by uniting the individual with all other people through a transcendent bond. Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” Walt Whitman (linkl) was a poet associated with the transcendentalists. His 1855 poem, “Song of Myself,” shocked many when it was first published, but it has been called one of the most influential poems in American literature. This steel engraving of Walt Whitman by Samuel Hollyer is from a lost daguerreotype by Gabriel Harrison, taken in 1854. I CELEBRATE myself, and sing myself, And what I assume you shall assume, For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. I loafe and invite my soul, I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass. My tongue, every atom of my blood, form’d from this soil, this air, Born here of parents born here from parents the same, I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin, Hoping to cease not till death. . . . And I say to mankind, Be not curious about God, For I who am curious about each am not curious about God, (No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God and about death.) I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least, Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself. . . . I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable, I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world. . . . You will hardly know who I am or what I mean, But I shall be good health to you nevertheless, And filter and fibre your blood. Failing to find me as I first keep encouraged, Missing me one place search another, I stop somewhere waiting for you. What images does Whitman use to describe himself and the world around him? What might have been shocking about this poem in 1855? Why do you think it has endured? Some critics took issue with transcendentalism’s emphasis on rampant individualism by pointing out the destructive consequences of compulsive human behavior. Herman Melville’s novel Moby Dick, Or, The Whale emphasized the perils of individual obsession by telling the tale of Captain Ahab’s single-minded quest to kill a white whale, Moby Dick, which had destroyed Ahab’s original ship and caused him to lose one of his legs. Edgar Allan Poe, a popular author, critic, and poet, decried “the so-called poetry of the so-called transcendentalists.” These American writers who questioned transcendentalism illustrate the underlying tension between individualism and conformity in American life. Confused about transcendentalism? You’re not alone! Transcendentalism is a movement that many people developed over a long period of time, and as a result, its complexity can make it hard to understand. That’s where we come in. Read this article to learn a simple but complete transcendentalism definition, key transcendentalist beliefs, an overview of the movement’s history, key players, and examples of transcendentalist works. By the end, you’ll have all the information you need to write about or discuss the transcendentalist movement. What Is Transcendentalism? It’s all about spirituality. Transcendentalism is a philosophy that began in the mid-19th century and whose founding members included Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. It centers around the belief that spirituality cannot be achieved through reason and rationalism, but instead through self-reflection and intuition. In other words, transcendentalists believe spirituality isn’t something you can explain; it’s something you feel. A transcendentalist would argue that going for a walk in a beautiful place would be a much more spiritual experience than reading a religious text. The transcendentalist movement arose as a result of a reaction to Unitarianism as well as the Age of Reason. Both centered on reason as the main source of knowledge, but transcendentalists rejected that notion. Some of the transcendentalist beliefs are: Humans are inherently good Society and its institutions such as organized religion and politics are corrupting. Instead of being part of them, humans should strive to be independent and self-reliant Spirituality should come from the self, not organized religion Insight and experience are more important than logic Nature is beautiful, should be deeply appreciated, and shouldn’t be altered by humans Major Transcendentalist Values The transcendentalist movement encompassed many beliefs, but these all fit into their three main values of individualism, idealism, and the divinity of nature. Individualism Perhaps the most important transcendentalist value was the importance of the individual. They saw the individual as pure, and they believed that society and its institutions corrupted this purity. Transcendentalists highly valued the concept of thinking for oneself and believed people were best when they were independent and could think for themselves. Only then could individuals come together and form ideal communities. Idealism The focus on idealism comes from Romanticism, a slightly earlier movement. Instead of valuing logic and learned knowledge as many educated people at the time did, transcendentalists placed great importance on imagination, intuition and creativity. They saw the values of the Age of Reason as controlling and confining, and they wanted to bring back a more “ideal” and enjoyable way of living. Divinity of Nature Transcendentalists didn’t believe in organized religion, but they were very spiritual. Instead of believing in the divinity of religious figures, they saw nature as sacred and divine. They believed it was crucial for humans to have a close relationship with nature, the same way religious leaders preach about the importance of having a close relationship with God. Transcendentalists saw nature as perfect as it was; humans shouldn’t try to change or improve it. History of the Transcendentalist Movement What’s the history of transcendentalism? Here’s an overview of the movement, covering its beginning, height, and eventual decline. Origins While people had begun discussing ideas related to transcendentalism since the early 1800s, the movement itself has its origins in 1830s New England, specifically Massachusetts. Unitarianism was the major religion in the area, and it emphasized spirituality and enlightenment through logic, knowledge, and rationality. Young men studying Unitarianism who disagreed with these beliefs began to meet informally. Unitarianism was a particularly large part of life at Harvard University, where many of the first transcendentalists attended school. In September 1836, Ralph Waldo Emerson organized the first meeting of what would later be called the Transcendental Club. Together the group discussed frustrations of Unitarianism and their main beliefs, drawing on ideas from Romanticism, German philosophers, and the Hindu spiritual texts the Upanishads. The transcendentalists begin to publish writings on their beliefs, beginning with Emerson’s essay “Nature.” Height The Transcendental Club continued to meet regularly, drawing in new members, and key figures, particularly Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, published numerous essays to further spread transcendentalist beliefs. In 1840, the journal The Dial was created for transcendentalists to publish their works. Utopia communities, such as Brook Farm and Fruitlands attempted to make transcendentalism a complete lifestyle. Decline By the end of the 1840s, many key transcendentalists had begun to move onto other pursuits, and the movement declined. This decline was further hastened by the untimely death of Margaret Fuller, one of the leading transcendentalists and cofounder of The Dial. While there was a smaller second wave of transcendentalism during this time, the brief resurgence couldn’t bring back the popularity the movement had enjoyed the previous decade, and transcendentalism gradually faded from public discourse, although people still certainly share the movement’s beliefs. Even recently, movies such as The Dead Poets Society and The Lion King express transcendentalist beliefs such as the importance of independent thinking, self-reliance, and enjoying the moment. Key Figures in the Transcendentalist Movement At its height, many people supported the beliefs of transcendentalism, and numerous well-known names from the 19th century have been associated with the movement. Below are five key transcendentalists. Ralph Waldo Emerson Emerson is the key figure in transcendentalism. He brought together many of the original transcendentalists, and his writings form the foundation of many of the movement’s beliefs. The day before he published his essay “Nature” he invited a group of his friends to join the “Transcendental Club” a meeting of like-minded individuals to discuss their beliefs. He continued to host club meetings, write essays, and give speeches to promote transcendentalism. Some of his most important transcendentalist essays include “The Over-Soul,” “Self-Reliance,” “The American Scholar,” and “Divinity School Address.” Henry David Thoreau The second-most important transcendentalist, Thoreau was a friend of Emerson’s who is best known for his book Walden. Walden is focused on the benefits of individualism, simple living and close contact with and observation of nature. Thoreau also frequently opposed the government and its actions, most notably in his essay “Civil Disobedience.” Margaret Fuller Margaret Fuller was perhaps the leading female transcendentalist. A well-known journalist and ardent supporter of women’s rights, she helped cofound The Dial, the key transcendentalist journal, with Emerson, which helped cement her place in the movement and spread the ideas of transcendentalism to a wider audience. An essay she wrote for the journal was later published as the book Woman in the Nineteenth Century, one of the earliest feminist works in the United States. She believed in the importance of the individual, but often felt that other transcendentalists, namely Emerson, focused too much on individualism at the expense of social reform. Amos Bronson Alcott A friend of Emerson’s, Alcott (father of Little Women’s Louisa May Alcott), was an educator known for his innovative ways of teaching and correcting students. He wrote numerous pieces on transcendentalism, but the quality of his writing was such that most were unpublishable. A noted abolitionist, he refused to pay his poll tax to protest President Tyler’s annexation of Texas as a slave territory. This incident inspired Thoreau to do a similar protest, which led to him writing the essay “Civil Disobedience.” Frederic Henry Hedge Frederic Henry Hedge met Emerson when both were students at Harvard Divinity School. Hedge was studying to become a Unitarian minister, and he had already spent several years studying music and literature in Germany. Emerson invited him to join the first meeting of the Transcendental Club (originally called Hedge’s Club, after him), and he attended meetings for several years. He wrote some of the earliest pieces later categorized as Transcendentalist works, but he later became somewhat alienated from the group and refused to write pieces for The Dial. George Ripley Like Hedge, Ripley was also a Unitarian minister and founding member of the Transcendental Club. He founded the Utopian community Brook Farm based on major Transcendentalist beliefs. Brook Farm residents would work the farm (whichever jobs they found most appealing) and use their leisure time to pursue activities they enjoyed, such as dancing, music, games, and reading. However, the farm was never able to do well financially, and the experiment ended after just a few years. Criticisms of Transcendentalism From its start, transcendentalism attracted numerous critics for its nontraditional, and sometimes outright alien, ideas. Many transcendentalists were seen as outcasts, and many journals refused to publish works written by them. Below are some of the most common criticisms. Spirituality Over Organized Religion For most people, the most shocking aspect of transcendentalism was that it promoted individual spirituality over churches and other aspects of organized religion. Religion was the cornerstone of many people’s lives at this time, and any movement that told them it was corrupting and to give it up would have been unfathomable to many. Over-Reliance on Independence Many people, even some transcendentalists like Margaret Fuller, felt that transcendentalism at times ignored the importance of community bonds and over-emphasized the need to rely on no one but one’s self, to the point of irresponsibility and destructiveness. Some people believe that Herman Melville’s book Moby Dick was written as a critique of complete reliance on independence. In the novel, the character Ahab eschews nearly all bonds of camaraderie and is focused solely on his goal of destroying the white whale. This eventually leads to his death. Margaret Fuller also felt that transcendentalism could be more supportive of community initiatives to better the lives of others, such as by advocating for women’s and children’s rights. Abstract Values Have a hard time understanding what transcendentalists really wanted? So did a lot of people, and it made them view the movement as nothing more than a bunch of dreamers who enjoyed criticizing traditional values but weren’t sure what they themselves wanted. Edgar Allen Poe accused the movement of promoting “obscurity for the sake of the sake.” Unrealistic Utopian Ideals Some people viewed the transcendentalists’ focus on enjoying life and maximizing their leisure time as hopelessly naive and idealistic. Criticism frequently focused on the Utopian communities some transcendentalists created to promote communal living and the balance of work and labor. Nathaniel Hawthorne, who stayed at the Brook Farm communal living experiment, disliked his experience so much that he wrote an entire novel, The Blithedale Romance, criticizing the concept and transcendentalist beliefs in general. Major Transcendentalist Works Many transcendentalists were prolific writers, and examples abound of transcendentalism quotes, essays, books, and more. Below are four examples of transcendentalist works, as well as which of the transcendentalist beliefs they support. “Self-Reliance” by Ralph Waldo Emerson Emerson wrote this essay in 1841 to share his views on the issue of, you guessed it, self-reliance. Throughout the essay he discusses the importance of individuality and how people must avoid the temptation to conform to society at the expense of their true selves. It also contains the excellent line “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.” There are three main ways Emerson says people should practice self-reliance is through non-conformity (“A man must consider what a blindman’s-bluff is this game of conformity”), solitude over society (“the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude”), and spirituality that is found in one’s own self (“The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure, that it is profane to seek to interpose helps”). Self-reliance and an emphasis on the individual over community is a core belief of transcendentalism, and this essay was key in developing that view. Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman Published in 1855, the first edition of Leaves of Grass included 12 untitled poems. Whitman was a fan of Emerson’s and was thrilled when the latter highly praised his work. The poems contain many transcendentalism beliefs, including an appreciation of nature, individualism, and spirituality. A key example is the poem later titled “Song of Myself” which begins with the line “I celebrate myself” and goes on to extoll the benefits of the individual “Welcome is every organ and attribute of me”, the enjoyment of nature (“The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark colored sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn”), the goodness of humans (“You shall possess the good of the earth and sun”), and the connections all humans share (“For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you”). “The Summer Rain” by Henry David Thoreau This transcendentalism poem, like many of Thoreau’s works, focuses on the beauty and simplicity of nature. Published in 1849, the poem describes the narrator’s delight at being in a meadow during a rainstorm. The poem frequently mentions the enjoyment that observing nature can bring, and there are many descriptions of the meadow such as, “A clover tuft is pillow for my head/And violets quite overtop my shoes.” But Thoreau also makes a point to show that he believes nature is more enjoyable and a better place to learn from than intellectual pursuits like reading and studying. He begins the poem with this verse: “My books I’d fain cast off, I cannot read/Twixt every page my thoughts go stray at large/Down in the meadow, where is richer feed,/And will not mind to hit their proper targe” and continues later on with “Here while I lie beneath this walnut bough,/What care I for the Greeks or for Troy town,/If juster battles are enacted now/Between the ants upon this hummock’s crown?” He makes clear that he is comparing works of Shakespeare and Homer to the joys of nature, and he finds nature the better and more enjoyable way to learn. This is in line with Transcendentalist beliefs that insight and experience are more rewarding than book learning. “What Is Beauty?” by Lydia Maria Child Lydia Maria Child, a women’s rights activist and abolitionist, wrote this essay, which was published in The Dial in 1843. The essay discusses what constitutes beauty and how we can appreciate beauty. It frequently references the transcendentalist theme that intuition and insight are more important than knowledge for understanding when something is beautiful, such as in the line “Beauty is felt, not seen by the understanding.” The essay also discusses the importance of nature, and how we can appreciate the beauty of the natural world. “The Great First Cause” by Ralph Waldo Emerson Emerson wrote this essay in 1841 to share his views on the issue of, you guessed it, self-reliance. 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