

## AMERICAN

## LITERATURE

# The Literature of the Transcendentalists

**1820–1850** One of the most influential American thinkers of the 19th century was Ralph Waldo Emerson. A poet, essayist, and lecturer, Emerson traveled to England in the early 1830s, where he met writers who were part of the romantic movement. Romanticism embodied a style of art, literature, and thought that stressed the human development of emotional forms of expression. Building on these ideas, Emerson developed transcendentalism—a distinctly American philosophical and literary movement that emphasized living a simple life that is not dictated by any organized system of belief.

Members of the transcendentalist movement included New England writers Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau. Although the movement was kindled by European romanticism, threads of transcendentalist thinking can be found in New England puritan thought, and some transcendentalists were students of Buddhism and other Asian traditions.



## ◀ MARGARET FULLER

Margaret Fuller was one of the editors of the transcendentalist journal *The Dial*. In 1845, Fuller published *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, a work that demanded equality and fulfillment for women.

“Is it not enough,” cries the irritated trader, “that you have done all you could to break up the national union, and thus destroy the prosperity of our country, but now you must be trying to break up family union, to take my wife away from the cradle and the kitchen-hearth to vote at polls and preach from a pulpit? Of course, if she does such things, she cannot attend to those of her own sphere. She is happy enough as she is. She has more leisure than I have—every means of improvement, every indulgence.”

“Have you asked her whether she was satisfied with these *indulgences*?”

“No, but I know she is. . . . I will never consent to have our peace disturbed by any such discussions.”

“Consent—you? It is not consent from you that is in question—it is assent from your wife.”

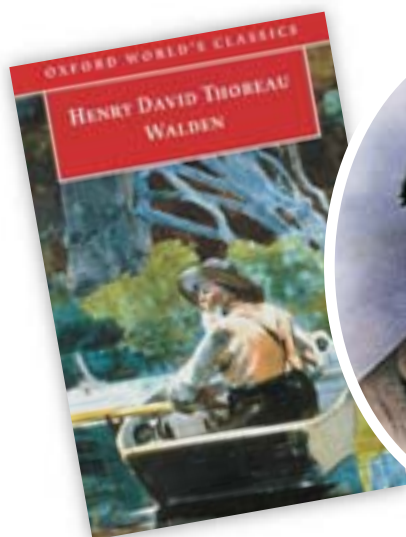
“Am not I the head of my house?”

“You are not the head of your wife. God has given her a mind of her own.”

—*Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845)

## ▼ HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Henry David Thoreau believed that people must be free to act by their own idea of right and wrong. His work helped shape many reform movements of his time. In *Walden*, published in 1854, Thoreau wrote about living alone in the woods. Thoreau urged people to reject the greed and materialism that was affecting Americans in their daily lives.



Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail. . . . Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion. . . .

If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right to be, music and poetry would resound along the streets. When we are unhurried and wise, we perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence, that petty fears and petty pleasures are but the shadow of the reality. . . .

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born. . . .

—*Walden* (published 1854)



## RALPH WALDO EMERSON ▲

Emerson's poem "Berrying" expresses his celebration of the truth found in nature and in personal emotion and imagination.

"May be true what I had heard,  
Earth's a howling wilderness  
Truculent with fraud and force,"  
Said I, strolling through the pastures,  
And along the riverside.  
Caught among the blackberry vines,  
Feeding on the Ethiops sweet,  
Pleasant fancies overtook me:  
I said, "What influence me preferred  
Elect to dreams thus beautiful?"  
The vines replied, "And didst thou deem  
No wisdom to our berries went?"

—"Berrying"  
(published 1846)

## THINKING CRITICALLY

- 1. Comparing and Contrasting** What does each selection reveal about habits and attitudes in 1850s America? Cite details to help explain your answers.



SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R8.

- 2. INTERNET ACTIVITY CLASSZONE.COM**

Use the links for American Literature to research and create an annotated book of famous transcendentalist quotations. Well-known examples might include: Emerson's "Hitch your wagon to a star," or Thoreau's "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." The quotations you choose for each writer should contain information on the source of the quotation and a short description of how each quotation expresses transcendentalist beliefs.