

# The transcendental movement: history and concepts



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The Transcendental Movement centered on thriving to discover the age-old philosophical question: What exactly is the true meaning of life? In order to find an answer, Transcendentalists focused on five main beliefs. They were individualism, nature, anti-materialism, intuition, and the quest to find the truth of existence (Gura). Notably, the Movement lured in famous names such as authors Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and women right's activist Margret Fuller. Due to the rather extreme liberal views and the controversy that arose from their particular ideology, Transcendentalism barely made a splash in the 1830 society (Blanch). However, as history has played out, the principles of the philosophical movement have clearly had an impact in American revolutions.

As much as the movement is often incorrectly labeled as being against Christian belief systems, Transcendentalism roots reach back to Christianity through the already liberal Unitarian denomination. In approximately 1835, young men training to become Unitarian ministers rebelled against their spiritual elders. They found the belief in Christ's miracles to be outlandish, claiming that his moral teachings were more than enough to make him a prophet (Gura). The men also rejected the blanket theory that human knowledge directly comes from senses; rather, they argued that spiritual principles that come from within one's self consequently lead to a better comprehension of the world.

Due to these first principles, the main ideas of Transcendentalism's "intuition" and "conscience" were quickly embraced. Founders claimed that through these ideas, one can move beyond- or "transcend"- past the dull experiences of the lower domain, and on to spiritual bliss. This euphoric state

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was only made possible through, as named by Ralph Emerson, the Oversoul, which is virtually defined as being a universal force in which every soul partakes. Through this Oversoul, one exceeds individual consciousness (Goodman).

At the core, Transcendentalists thoroughly believed in equality, for there was no distinct line between the saved and the damned. It was truly up to the individual whether or not to take advantage of the Oversoul that takes them into the spiritual world. Because of the main theme of equality, the philosophy seemed perfectly fitted for a nation that claimed to be founded upon equivalence (Gura). However, as history has proven, the United States has, by no means, been the perfect picture of social fairness.

Obviously, the transcendental theory conflicted with the antebellum efforts of social reform. The new philosophy deemed that if all, regardless of race and gender, were created equal, then they should be treated as such. From the start, the movement's ideals have played a strong role in American social progression. Phillip F. Gura states, " For some, such reform activities were the natural outgrowth of Transcendentalist thought, and they made social reform virtually the entire focus of their Transcendentalism."

Transcendentalism deeply influenced the women right's development (Reuben). This philosophy was one of the first to make the fight for gender equality seem somewhat acceptable. It had a strong impact on activist Margret Fuller, who is one of the most famous feminists in recorded history. She first broke down the occupational inequality barriers when she became the editor at the Transcendental Club newspaper titled, *The Dial*. Later on,

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she wrote *Women of the Ninetieth Century*, which, due to its political radicalness, became the most known feminist book of its era, and drew mass attention to the cause (“Margret Fuller”).

Two decades before the civil war, this movement was already battling the fight against slavery. These philosophers wrote letters, articles, and provided lectures in hopes of achieving the abolition of enslavement. Their acts were controversial and received little attention, but their attempts quickly rallied the concept that perhaps slavery was indeed wrong. Their ideology fanned the flames of the fire that would eventually lead to the Civil War (Hampson). These outspoken men and women would use the transcendental idea of individuality and equality to justify their beliefs.

The Transcendental movement did not only effect gender and racial equality. It was also an innovator for many upcoming changes throughout generations within the United States society. For instance, Bronson Alcott began the Temple School- the first school designed for young children in order to teach their inborn divinity and encouraged early self-discovery (Gura). Due to these radical teachings, parents of the students forced Alcott to shut down the educational program. However, his teaching assistant, Elizabeth Peabody, another famous feminist, went on to develop the first kindergarten movement within the United States (Blanch).

Other Transcendentalists moved on to more of a political standpoint, and became what, today, we call socialists (Goodman). Former Unitarian pastor George Ripely left the pulpit and started the Institute of Agriculture and Education. Through his educational experiments that involved living in

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communal existence, he tried to dissolve the definitive lines that lay between workers and intellectuals. He started dividing the community's profits into the socialist principles, also making the community members rotate through different jobs.

When hearing of this experiment, Alcott decided to institute a new experiment of his own. He and other transcendentalists decided to become vegetarian, and to give up materialistic aspects (Gura). This chain ultimately affected Henry David Thoreau, a transcendental writer. Thoreau moved into a small cabin located near Walden Pond by himself for two years. He lived purely on the bare necessities one needs in order to survive. In this time frame, Thoreau wrote the novel *Walden*, in which he spoke of his lifestyle, transcendentalism, and the importance of searching spirituality through nature without the burdens of materialistic aspects (Blanch). Lynn Branch describes Thoreau's impact by saying:

Thoreau was also a forerunner of the environmental movement and his book, *Walden*, about man's fundamental connection to nature, raised a new consciousness about nature's role in our spiritual and social lives. He championed the idea of public parks and nature reserves as important links to spirituality and lamented the destruction of the forests as the destruction of our earthly paradise when he declared, "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads."

Ultimately, over the years, *Walden* has sold hundreds of thousands of copies. The writings became an extremely popular book, informing audiences of the philosophy of transcendentalism. Thoreau's novel deeply impacted such

times like the Great Depression Era, when learning to live simplistically proved to be essential, and the 1960's, which, of course, was the decade of individuality (Blanch).

Transcendentalists were, for a lack of a better word, the first form of “hippies.” They stressed the importance of environmental importance, equality, individuality, and spirituality (Gura). Their ideals have greatly impacted the United States society in many forms, including gender and racial reform, environmental protection, economical viewpoints, and education. Although their movement would, by no means, be considered the most direct and known historical force in the progression of American society, their underlying beliefs are nearly identical and parallel to the lifestyle that is evident today. The spiritual and individualistic ideology shaped the modern culture that is displayed today.

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