

During the American Renaissance or what is also known as the New England Renaissance (1830-1865), an elite, aristocratic group of individuals established a new American literature (britannica.com). Within this time frame, however, a very specific group of individuals, concentrated in the Boston and Concord area, transformed the culture of American literature altogether; they were the Transcendentalists.

This was a movement in which people were concerned with individualism, self-improvement, spiritualism, and moral protest- a distinct change from the British idealism of “For King/Queen and Country.” Transcendentalists were inspired, “to look into themselves, into nature, into art, and through work for answers to life's most perplexing questions” (ushistory.org). This was not a religion but a change in thought and movement promoting social reform. As one of the original and true Transcendentalists, Henry David Thoreau “...sought to transcend his senses and attain a higher understanding of life...” when, for two years, he ascribed to an ascetic life at Walden Pond (pbs.org). you can see their ideals in their titles of their works if not their works alone.

Although it began as a casual discussion group in Boston, it developed into a national movement and did not slow down until before the Civil War. In fact, their early ideals and writings are quite prophetic regarding the inevitability of the Civil War based on the social injustices about which they wrote. The profound influences that the Transcendentalists had on American ideals and values can still be seen today as people continue to fight for social injustices, while they strive to transcend their senses and find understanding and meaning in their own lives.

Not only was their intellect astounding, but their liberal ideals were well beyond their time as they ignored the stringent gender roles of the time. They welcomed women not only as participants in The Club, but as equals who stepped easily into leading roles within it.

Proclaiming themselves “The Transcendentalist Club,” members included many of the most celebrated and popular writers in America:

- Ralph Waldo Emerson (designated leader of the club, *Nature, The Conduct of Life*)
- Henry David Thoreau (*Walden*)
- Margaret Fuller (America’s first true feminist, author, teacher, journalist, editor of *The Dial*),
- The Alcotts: Bronson, Abigail May (artist), and Louisa May (*Little Women*),
- Elizabeth Peabody (feminist)

These are some of the originals, but their inspiration was so profound that many other distinguished authors continued to emerge from beyond Boston and Concord into other parts of the new America:

- Nathaniel Hawthorne (*Scarlet Letter*),
- Henry W. Longfellow (Poet: *Poems on Slavery*),
- Edgar Allan Poe (Tell Tale Heart...),
- Emily Dickinson (Letters and poems),
- Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*),
- Henry Melville (*Moby Dick*),
- Julia Ward Howe (*The Battle Hymn of the Republic*)

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