Unit #2:
Romanticism, Transcendentalism, & Gothic Literature

Part 2: Transcendentalism
(1836 – 1860)
An important intellectual movement in philosophy and literature that flourished around 1836-1860.

People, men and women equally, have knowledge about themselves and the world around them.

This "transcends" or goes beyond what they can see, hear, taste, touch or feel.
The basic truths of the universe are beyond any knowledge that can be obtained through our senses.

Intuition is the source of real truth because intuition goes beyond (transcends) what we can see or hear, or what can be learned from books.

Intuition never reasons and never proves; it simply perceives.
Key Ideas: Optimism

- Human possibilities are limitless.
  - Therefore, we should be optimistic about human nature and human progress.
- God is within us – and within all living things.
Key Ideas: Importance of Individual

- Emphasized the significance and betterment of the individual.
- Believed that the individual was the most important element in society.
- This is different from the beliefs of the Puritans and the Age of Reason.
Key Ideas: Importance of Individual

- People should be themselves & accept nothing just because it is widely accepted.
- People need to see answers for themselves.
- Believed that the ideal kind of individual was self-reliant and unselfish.
Key Ideas: Importance of Nature

- Nature’s beauty is a visual aspect of the beauty of human nature.
- Nature has spiritual manifestations, nature is filled with the presence of God.
- Nature was God's revelation towards human beings.
- Therefore, Nature can influence the human mind.
- The transcendentalists stressed the unity of nature and humans.
- Nature is a way for humans to stay in touch with their souls and spiritual foundations.
Death is never to be feared, for once we die, we merely pass to the “Oversoul.”

The “Oversoul” was an all-pervading unitary spiritual power of goodness from which all things came and of which everyone was a part.

The soul of each individual is identical with the soul of the world and contains what the world contains.
Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803—1882):
Background

- Graduated from Harvard
- Became a Unitarian minister to the Second Church of Boston, but not for long.
- Found the rationality of Unitarianism intolerable; he decided to leave his job as minister.
- Went to Europe and met authors such as Coleridge, Carlyle and Wordsworth.
- He made friends with them and brought back the influence of European Romanticism.
- He then founded a Transcendentalists' Club, published a journal, and became the most eloquent spokesman of Transcendentalism.
Emerson’s Beliefs

- Emerson had no sense of evil and was too optimistic about human nature and the society. Somebody once called this kind of optimism "Transcendental folly."

- In the eyes of Emerson, “Nature is the vehicle of thought,” and “particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.”

- Emerson envisioned religion as an emotional communication between an individual soul and the universal “Oversoul.”
Emerson’s Views on Poetry

- Poets should function as preachers who give directions to the mass.
- True poetry and true art should serve as a moral purification and a passage toward organic unity and higher reality.
- Emerson places emphasis on ideas, symbols and imaginative words.
- Emerson called upon American authors to celebrate America and the life today.
Emerson’s Idea About Individualism

- Self-trust and self-reliance is very important.
- He believes that the possibilities for man to develop and improve himself are infinite.
- The individual, not the crowd, is the most important of all. Men should and could be self-reliant.
- Trust yourself: to trust one’s self was really to trust the “voice of God” speaking intuitively within us.
Ralph Waldo Emerson’s major works

- 1836 *Nature* (“The Bible of Transcendentalism”, declared the birth of Transcendentalism
- 1837 *The American Scholar* (American’s Declaration of Intellectual Independence)
- 1841 *Essays* “Self-Reliance”
- 1844 *Essays: Second Series*
- 1849 *Representative Men*
- 1860 *The Conduct of Life*
Principles of “Self – Reliance”

- Determine Truth for Yourself
  - Only accept those traditions which appear to be true; reject the rest.

- Know Thyself
  - Become a person of principle and then live by those principles, even if the majority of society doesn’t agree.

- Be Yourself
  - Exercise the self-discipline necessary to study oneself in relation to nature.
HENRY DAVID THOREAU
(1817-1862)

- Probably best known for *Civil Disobedience*
- Practiced his own preaching.
- Influenced future leaders.
Background

- Became friends with Emerson.
- Used Emerson’s library and embraced his ideas on transcendentalism.
- Turned his back on material rewards.
- Devoted his life to the study of nature and his own individual spirit.
- Thought that people tend to live in the past or to try to foresee the future; we must follow nature’s example and live in the present.
In 1845, with the permission of Emerson, he went to build a cabin on a piece of Emerson’s property on Walden Pond.

Lived on Walden Pond for two years; he lived alone in a one-room shack and tried to be self-sufficient in every thing.

He connects himself to nature and detaches from society to live the self-reliant lifestyle of the Transcendentalists. Thoreau thought that by returning to nature, he would better understand the essential fact of life.
Walden

- Described the author’s extremely simple life.
- Criticized the modern civilization.
- Told people to leave the life of hurry and bustle and to sink themselves in nature.
- Spiritual richness is real wealth.
- Structural framework of the book is within a single year, and progresses through spring, summer and autumn to winter.
- Thoreau was a great experimentalist who put Emerson's transcendental doctrines into practice in the actual life.
Civil Disobedience

- Detained for a night in jail for refusing to pay a tax of $2.00 to the government.
  - He didn’t want to help fund a war that he didn’t believe in.
- Inspired him to write his famous essay “Civil Disobedience”, which influenced people such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.
“Fight” for Your Rights: “Civil Disobedience” Principles

- Least Government is Best
  - Have the courage to practice some form of non-violent protest if a law violates your principles.
  - Protest even if you must suffer the consequences.
Four Tenants of Civil Disobedience

- You must...
  - know the law.
  - appeal to a higher law (morality, God, etc.)
  - know the consequences for violating the law.
  - choose to suffer the consequences.

![Mugshots of four individuals](image-url)
The Legacy of Transcendentalism

- As a group, the transcendentalists led the celebration of the American experience as one of individualism and self-reliance.
- Transcendentalists were visionaries of social reform.
- They took progressive stands on women's rights, abolition, reform, and education.
The Legacy of Transcendentalism

- They criticized government, organized religion, laws, social institutions, and creeping industrialization.

- They created an American "state of mind" in which...
  - imagination was better than reason
  - creativity was better than theory
  - action was better than contemplation.

- And they had faith that all would be well because humans could transcend limits and reach astonishing heights.