

Transcendentalism Online Lesson

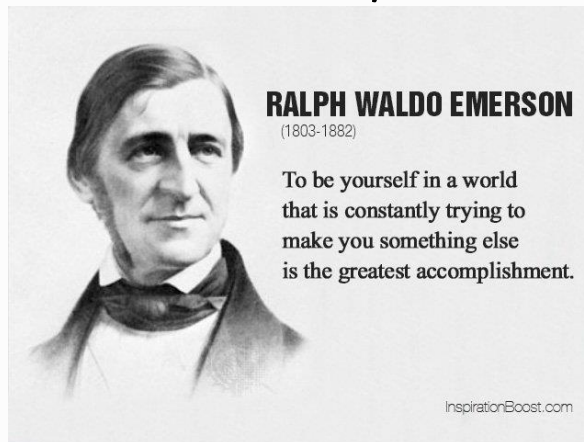
Transcendental – being beyond ordinary or common experience, thought, or belief.

“Transcend”

- Meaning to live on a level above and beyond the common or the physical.

American Transcendentalism (1836-1860) is...

- An early 19th Century American philosophy - not a literary period.
- Associated primarily with Ralph Waldo Emerson, & centered in the Boston area.
- Significant interest in new forms of education & society, including utopian communities (e.g. Brook Farm).



Transcendentalism...

- rejects the idea that knowledge can be fully derived from experience and observation; truth resides in the spiritual world and within ourselves; therefore, self-reliance and individuality are critical.

Transcendentalism's Chief Characteristics

- praises individual worth over society
- contempt for attachment to social customs and habits
- believe in living in harmony with nature
- great dignity in manual labor
- relationship with God should be personal
- revolutionary thoughts and ideas
- rejection of customs, especially traditional European ones

Transcendentalism...

- Belief that people are innately good.
- All life (people, animals, etc.) are connected and share the same soul; there is an essential unity of all creation.
- There is a deep continuity between nature and humans; nature thus has deep religious meaning.
- If man was left to his natural state – not influenced by society – he would naturally be moral.
- Society pollutes man.



“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”

-Henry David Thoreau
philosopher, writer, author, poet,
born July 12, 1817-1862



Transcendentalism never spread more than 50 miles from Boston; however, it is said to be the inspiration for the following:

- Walt Whitman & Robert Frost
- Civil Rights Movement of the 20th Century

"Peace is always
Beautiful"

-Walt Whitman

Two roads diverged
in a wood and I—
I took the one
less travelled by.
And that has made
all the difference.
~ Robert Frost.

Topics commonly found in Transcendental Thought:

Nonconformity

Self-reliance

Free Thought

Confidence

Importance of Nature

THE ONLY PERSON
YOU ARE
DESTINED
TO BECOME
IS THE PERSON YOU
DECIDE
TO BE
~ RALPH WALDO EMERSON ~

LIVE IN THE SUNSHINE,
SWIM THE SEA,
DRINK THE WILD AIR
Ralph Waldo Emerson
PIMPELMEES

What lies
behind us
AND WHAT LIES
before us
are tiny matters
compared to what
lies within us
- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson: Founder of Transcendental Thought



There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better for worse as his portion; that though the wise universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried.

Excerpt from "Self-Reliance"

Biography

- Born in 1803 in Boston, MA
- Occupations: Unitarian minister, public lecturer, essayist
 - 1836: writes *Nature*
- That same year, starts meeting with the Transcendental Club: Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, & Bronson Alcott
- Continued traveling and writing until his death in 1882.



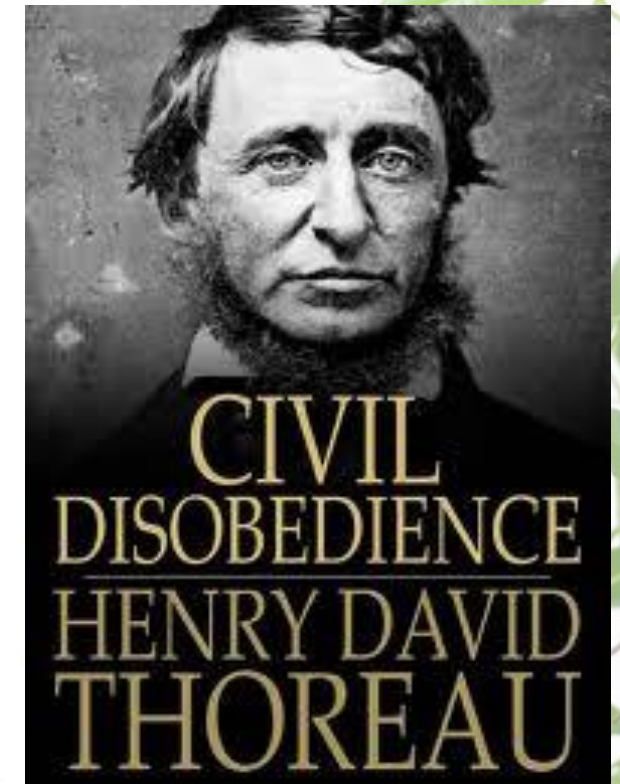
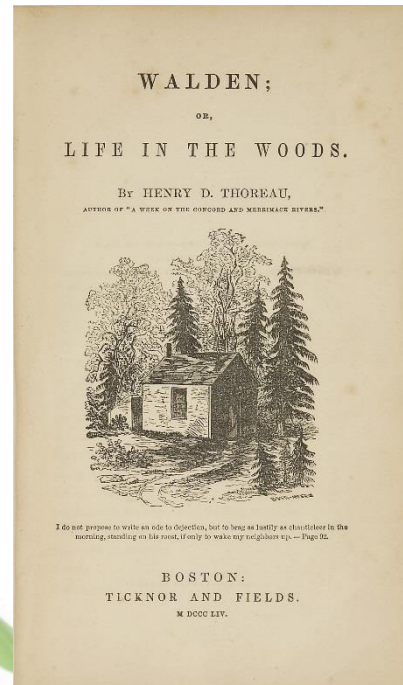
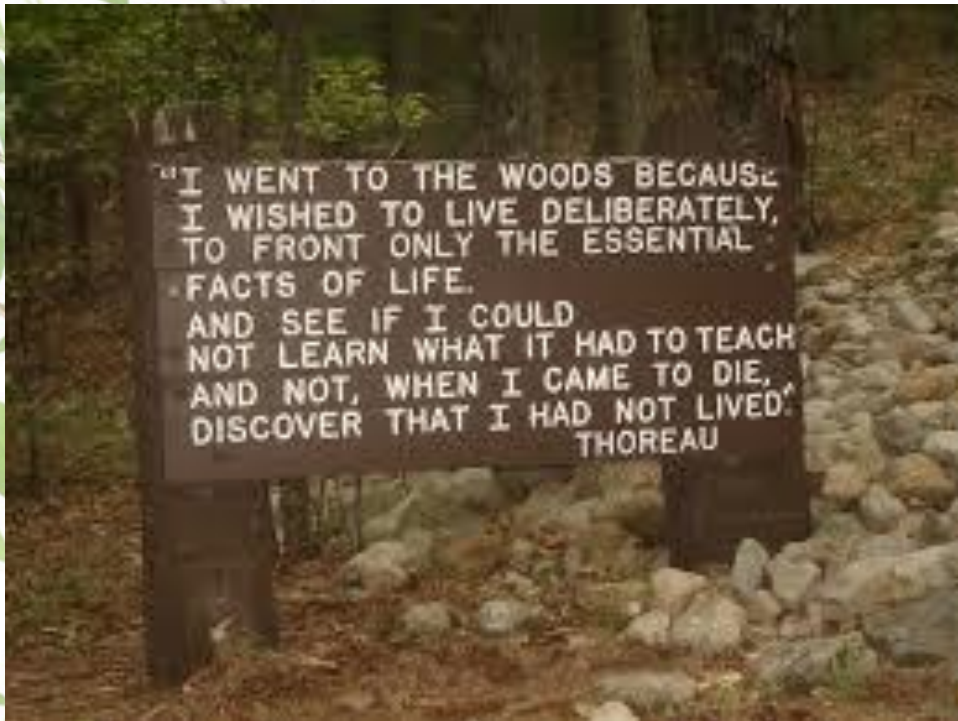
- Master stylist - focused on clarity and rhythm within his prose.
- Focused on the following: unity within nature, the importance of the individual, and the need to live in the present.
- Felt that society viewed nonconformity as a threat, and that society promoted uniformity and blind obedience.

“To be great
is to be
misunderstood.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Henry David Thoreau

Best known for *Walden*, a reflection upon simple living in natural surroundings, and his essay *Civil Disobedience*, an argument for individual resistance to the government in moral opposition to an unjust state.



- **Built a cabin on property owned by Emerson & moved in on July 4th, 1845.**
- **Lived economically & comfortably for two years & two months.**
- **Experiment in self-reliance, but not a flight from society.**

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived....



- In 1854, Thoreau published *Walden, or Life in the Woods*. The book compressed the time into a single calendar year, using the passage of four seasons to symbolize human development.
- *Walden* initially won few admirers, but today it is regarded as a classic that explores natural simplicity, harmony, and beauty as models for just social and cultural conditions.



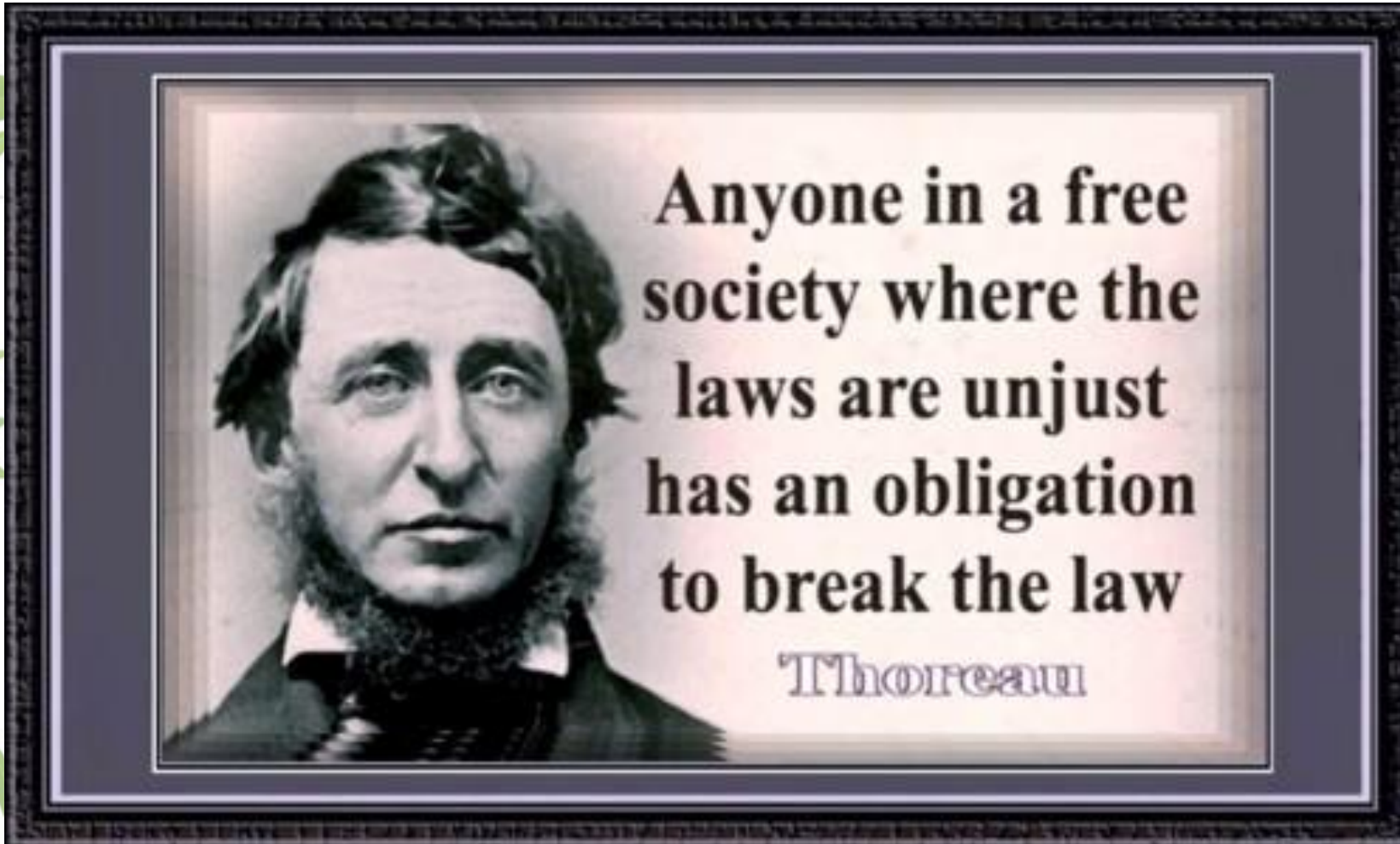
- In 1846, during a day trip to town, Thoreau was arrested for refusing to pay poll taxes (fees to vote) in protest against the Mexican American War.
- He spent one night in jail, but to Thoreau his imprisonment was an act of conscience not lawlessness.
- His description of being imprisoned underlies the central theme in his most famous essay “Civil Disobedience” published in 1849.
- Civil Disobedience refers to nonviolent protest against laws he considered unjust – *civil* as distinct from *military* protest.



Under
a government
which imprisons
any unjustly,
the true place for
a just man
is in prison

- Henry David Thoreau

- **Civil Disobedience:** refusal to obey civil laws in an effort to induce change in governmental policy or legislation, characterized by the use of passive resistance or other nonviolent means.



- **Both Gandhi (leader of India's struggle against Great Britain) & Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. urged protestors who wanted change to use non-violent protest to express themselves.**
- **Both were heavily influenced by Thoreau.**

