What is Transcendentalism?

It’s a question that many readers of my "Women in Transcendentalism" series have asked. So I’ll try to explain it here.

When I first learned about Transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau in high school English class, I admit: I couldn’t figure out what the term "Transcendentalism" meant. I couldn’t figure out what the central idea was that held all those authors and poets and philosophers together so that they deserved this categorical name, Transcendentalists. And so, if you’re at this page because you’re having difficulty: you’re not alone. Here’s what I’ve learned since high school about this subject.

The Transcendentalists can be understood in one sense by their context -- by what they were rebelling against, what they saw as the current situation and therefore as what they were trying to be different from.

One way to look at the Transcendentalists is to see them as a generation of well educated people who lived in the decades before the American Civil War and the national division that it both reflected and helped to create. These people, mostly New Englanders, mostly around Boston, were attempting to create a uniquely American body of literature. It was already decades since the Americans had won independence from England. Now, these people believed, it was time for literary independence. And so they deliberately went about creating literature, essays, novels, philosophy, poetry, and other writing that were clearly different from anything from England, France, Germany, or any other European nation.
Another way to look at the Transcendentalists is to see them as a generation of people struggling to define spirituality and religion (our words, not necessarily theirs) in a way that took into account the new understandings their age made available.

The new Biblical Criticism in Germany and elsewhere had been looking at the Christian and Jewish scriptures through the eyes of literary analysis and had raised questions for some about the old assumptions of religion.

The Enlightenment had come to new rational conclusions about the natural world, mostly based on experimentation and logical thinking. The pendulum was swinging, and a more Romantic way of thinking -- less rational, more intuitive, more in touch with the senses -- was coming into vogue. Those new rational conclusions had raised important questions, but were no longer enough.

German philosopher Kant raised both questions and insights into the religious and philosophical thinking about reason and religion.

This new generation decided that the revolutions had not gone far enough, and had stayed too much in the rational mode. "Corpse-cold" Emerson called the previous generation of rational religion.

The spiritual hunger of the age that also gave rise to a new evangelical Christianity gave rise, in the educated centers in New England and around Boston, to an intuitive, experiential, passionate, more-than-just-rational perspective. God gave humankind the gift of intuition, the gift of insight, the gift of inspiration. Why waste such a gift?

Added to all this, the scriptures of non-Western cultures were discovered in the West, translated, and published so that they were more widely available. The Harvard-educated Emerson and others began to read Hindu and Buddhist scriptures, and examine their own religious assumptions against these scriptures.
In their perspective, a loving God would not have led so much of humanity astray; there must be truth in these scriptures, too. **Truth, if it agreed with an individual's intuition of truth, must be indeed truth.**

And so Transcendentalism was born. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds...A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men."

Yes, men, but women too.

Most of the Transcendentalists became involved as well in social reform movements, especially anti-slavery and women's rights. (Abolitionism was the word used for the more radical branch of anti-slavery reformism; feminism was a word that was invented deliberately in France some decades later and was not, to my knowledge, found in the time of the Transcendentalists.) Why social reform, and why these issues in particular?

The Transcendentalists, despite some remaining Euro-chauvinism in thinking that people with British and German backgrounds were more suited for freedom than others (see some of Theodore Parker's writings, for instance, for this sentiment), also believed that at the level of the human soul, all people had access to divine inspiration and sought and loved freedom and knowledge and truth.
Thus, those institutions of society which fostered vast differences in the ability to be educated, to be self-directed, were institutions to be reformed. Women and African-descended slaves were human beings who deserved more ability to become educated, to fulfill their human potential (in a twentieth-century phrase), to be fully human.

Men like Theodore Parker and Thomas Wentworth Higginson who identified themselves as Transcendentalists, also worked for freedom of the slaves and for women's freedom.

And, many women were active Transcendentalists.

Read more: Women of Transcendentalism.

Transcendentalism

The Transcendentalist
Emerson's essay describing the movement's aims and goals.

An excerpt from that essay
Emerson succinctly defines Transcendentalism

American Renaissance and Transcendentalism
From PBS’ series I Hear America Singing (Thomas Hampson), a description of Transcendentalism. Links to more info on Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, Dickinson, others.

Transcendentalist Women

About Emily Dickinson
Emily Dickinson materials on this site: articles, quotations, etc.

About Julia Ward Howe
Articles, quotations, net links and writings on Julia Ward Howe.

Emily Dickinson: Continuing Enigma
Here’s the story of how the enigmatic Emily Dickinson's poems came to public attention.

Transcendentalist Women Part 1
Margaret Fuller, editor of Dial and key Transcendentalist writer, plus Mary Moody Emerson, Ralph Waldo's aunt and teacher.
Transcendentalist Women Part 2
More incredible women: Harriet Martineau, the incredible Peabody sisters (writers, educators, illustrator), and Julia Ward Howe.

Emerson, Thoreau, Other Men

Ralph Waldo Emerson resources
Comprehensive guide to Emerson materials.

Emerson's essays
Web-readable versions of most of Emerson's published works (his journals and letters aren't there).

Henry David Thoreau resources
A comprehensive listing of Thoreau links.

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