

# American transcendentalism



**Emerson**  
1803 –1882

## Nature (1836)

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy out of insight and not tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?

To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars.

So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes. Every spirit builds itself a house; and beyond its house a world; and beyond its world, a heaven. Know then, that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect. What we are, that only can we see. All that Adam had, all that Caesar could, you have and can do. Adam called his house, heaven and earth; Caesar called his house, Rome; you perhaps call yours, a cobbler's trade; a hundred acres of ploughed land; or a scholar's garret.

Build, therefore, your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions. A correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit. So fast will disagreeable appearances, swine, spiders, snakes, pests, madhouses, prisons, enemies, vanish; they are temporary and shall be no more seen. The sordor and filths of nature, the sun shall dry up, and the wind exhale.

## The American Scholar (1837)

We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe

He shall see that nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part....Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind

**Nature // the Past**--the theory of **books** is noble//**Action** --There goes in the world a notion that the scholar should be a recluse—as unfit for any handiwork or public labor, as a pen-knife for an axe. YET, “Without [action] thought can never ripen into truth.”

## Self-Reliance” and “Circles” in Essays, 1841

Trust thyself:



It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude

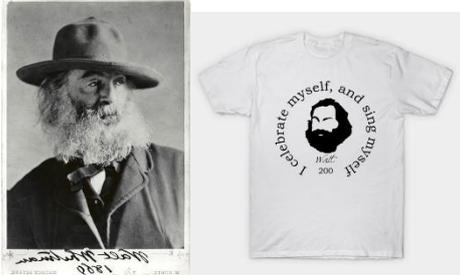
Listen to things that reside in the individual and not rely on the influence of those in the community.

To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, -- that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost.

What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. ... For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure.

## The Poet, 1844

Our logrolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes, and Indians, our boats, and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues, and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon, and Texas, are yet unsung.

<p><b>Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres."</b></p>	<p>"for it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing."</p>
<p><b>Walden, 1854</b></p>  <p><b>Thoreau was a lifelong abolitionist, delivering lectures that attacked the Fugitive Slave Law (1793 and 1850) His philosophy of civil disobedience later influenced the political thoughts and actions of such figures as Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr.</b></p>	<p>"When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only" (3)</p> <p>"I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms" (81)</p> <p>"Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind" (13).</p> <p>"To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically" (13).</p> <p>"One inconvenience I sometimes experienced in so small a house, the difficulty of getting to a sufficient distance from my guest when we began to utter the big thoughts in big words. You want room for your thoughts to get into sailing trim and run a course or two before they make their port. Our sentences wanted room to unfold and form their columns in the interval" (127–128).</p> <p>"I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society. When visitors came in larger and unexpected numbers there was but the third chair for them all, but they generally economized the room by standing up. It is surprising how many great men and women a small house will contain" (127).</p>
<p><b>Resistance to Civil Government" also known as "Civil Disobedience, 184</b></p>	<p>I heartily accept the motto,—'That government is best which governs least;' and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe,—'That government is best which governs not at all;' and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. [...] I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government</p>
<p><b>Walter Whitman, 1819 –1892</b> <b>Leaves of Grass: The Original 1855</b></p>  <p><b>Be curious, not judgmental</b></p>	<p>Keep your face always toward the sunshine and shadows will fall behind you.</p> <p>I CELEBRATE myself, and sing myself, And what I assume you shall assume, For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise, Regardless of others, ever regardful of others, Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,</p> <p>Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)</p>

**Margaret Fuller, 1810 –1850** = "I believe that the development of the one cannot be effected without that of the other. My highest wish is that this truth should be distinctly and rationally apprehended, and the conditions of life and freedom recognized as the same for the daughters and the sons."