**Transcendentalism**

The nineteenth century ended the era of optimism of nation founded on freedom and human rights, giving way to tough times for the newly born nation: it was a time of several social unrest, including the Indian removal, increasing growth of slavery, cholera epidemic and violent political environment. However, on the intellectual level, American authors did not seem to care about all these hardships, and seemed more optimistic about the nation’s future. Their ideas were more of a reaction to Enlightenment ideas rather than an interaction with their own time. As romanticists, they rejected Enlightenment perception of nature, which perceives nature from a scientific point of view, rendering it to a subject to be used or exploited; romanticism declares that nature is somewhere where man could be merged in as a particle among infinite number of particles, sort of a complete union between man, nature and God.

Romantic essayists argue that *art* rather than *science* could better understand and express human condition. Their view, based on unity of nature and man, relies heavily on exploring the self, claiming then: To know one’s self is to know others; thus to feel their needs and seek equality for them. New terms emerged in their writings, focusing on the notion of the self, such as self-awareness, self-reliance, self-expression and self-realization. Other authors, though not essayists, were influenced by this growing focus on the self and wrote stories about characters who often face risks in their journey to discover one’s self.

**Romantic Individualism** The belief that individuals are endowed with not only reason but also an intuition that allows them to receive and interpret spiritual truths. Individuals thus have a responsibility to throw off the shackles of traditions and inherited conventions in order to live creatively according to their own unique perception of truth. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” is often considered a manifesto of Romantic Individualism.

**Main Authors:**

Ralph Waldo Emerson: like most nineteenth-century Americans, Emerson faced extreme hardships and tragedies: lost his father (8) his wife only after a year of their marriage, his son (5) his brother (30) another brother struggled with madness. Despite all that, the man was confident that he could create an intellectual and also a moral system for the American people. Emerson was an active figure in the rather liberal religious movement in New England, which stressed the inherent goodness of humanity, the importance of reason and conscience over ritual, and the equality of all people before God. Eventually, he resigned from the church and took a tour of Europe, where he met many philosophers and romantic leading writers (among them William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge and Charles Dickens). In Paris, he had a kind of epiphany about the relation between nature, man and God, and so declared himself as a romantic naturalist. Following European romanticism, Emerson and other writers found in the United States the perfect environment for such ideas. With fewer universities, colleges and books, and with much more landscapes and wilderness, America was the fertile land for romanticism with its ideas about nature to grow and spread. Emerson thought that reason is important, but so are intuition and inner impressions. He believed in the ability of the self to achieve its perfect potential and toward merging with the divine totality (with God). Humanism, for him, was the ability to realize this relationship and make it a life style. It is a kind of spiritual obligation that American people are required to do; failing to do so strip man from his humanity.

Emerson also criticized education for its old and irrelevant themes and called students and scholars to rely on their intellect, away from what is in old books and old philosophies: “a declaration of intellectual independence.” Forty years later, Emerson built on Franklin’s practical ideas of self-improvement and made them more personal and spiritual. He encouraged Americans to look inward, trust their intuition, and develop their own principles. His ideas influenced social activists to fight and achieve more equality among American people. In *Nature* he established the philosophy of transcendentalism: unity of nature, man and divinity. He also influenced contemporary authors such as Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Margaret Fuller: also highly influenced by Emerson’s Ideas, is still considered a unique feminist. She was the editor of the *Dial,* Transcendentalists’ Journal. She urged American women to seek education and think for themselves. She was also a critic, novelists and essayist.

Henry David Thoreau: lived with minimum needs yet independent. His writings, including his finest *Walden,* are based on this principle. His philosophy influenced a lot of nationalists and activists in the nineteenth up to the twentieth century, including Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, who followed his teachings in his famous essay “Civil Disobedience.”