In this novel about Ralph Waldo Emerson's wife, Lidian, Amy Belding Brown examines the emotional landscape of love and marriage. Living in the shadow of one of the most famous men of her time, Lidian becomes deeply disappointed by marriage, but consigned to public silence by social conventions and concern for her family's reputation. Drawn to the erotic energy and intellect of close family friend Henry David Thoreau, she struggles to negotiate the confusing territory between love and friendship while maintaining her moral authority and inner strength. In the course of the book, she deals with overwhelming social demands, faces devastating personal loss, and discovers the deepest meaning of love. Lidian eventually encounters the truth of her own character and learns that even our faults can lead us to independence.

Praise

"This is the book I longed to read. It is the story of Lidian, the fascinating woman who was loved insufficiently by Emerson and perhaps too much by Thoreau. Amy Belding Brown has brought her back to life in a novel that glitters with intelligence and authenticity." — Geraldine Brooks, author of Year of Wonders and March

"In this extraordinary book, Amy Belding Brown has brought the 19th century to life. We may think of Ralph Waldo Emerson and his family and friends as static daguerreotypes, but in this story they lightly spring off the page with all the inconvenient desires and ambitions that are the texture of our own lives. A soaring imaginative leap, this book combines detailed history with a page-turning illicit love story. It's a look at a rich moment in American History and a great read, a rare combination." — Susan Cheever, author of My Name is Bill and Note Found in a Bottle

"Brown's writing is graceful, at times giving Lidian a poetic voice... In an age when scholarly biographers meticulously document every detail in the actions and settings of their subjects, Brown has escaped the freedom of fiction to
suppose 'what might have been.'" – Christian Science Monitor

"Amy Belding Brown's novel is a beautiful work that renders effortlessly the sentiments and sensuousness of a woman who is, to use Ms. Brown's own terms, "at war with herself, a woman of opposites who yearns to reconcile her mental acuity with her emotional sensitivity." The spiritual, emotional and intellectual lives she is after illuminating for us are wonderfully ambitious, and it is quite refreshing to see that ambition bucked up with a quality of writing that bears up to the weight of its subject matter."
– Bret Lott, author of the bestseller and Oprah-pick Jewel

"Mr. Emerson's Wife engages with intelligence and passion the mind of Lidian Emerson and what is found are the staggering daily compromises and frustrations of an intellectual 19th century woman. Bless all the conflicted freedoms she sought—and bless too Amy Belding Brown for delivering us a robust novel that situates itself with grace and struggle in feminine consciousness among the Concord men."
– Victoria Redel, author of Loverboy

"Where historians dare not go, Amy Belding Brown's imagination takes us in this fictional story of "Mr. Emerson's Wife" and she takes us in a vessel securely crafted from historical fact. She fills in the dark gaps of history with vivid imagination, and she does it without violating a single historical fact. Her powerful story telling allows us to see and understand a chapter in the making of America that all the biographies of Emerson, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller and the Alcotts can only hint at. I don't know who to celebrate more—the resurrection of Lidian Emerson or Amy Belding Brown's ascent to the first ranks of historical fiction."
– Wallace Kaufman, science writer and author of Coming Out of the Woods: The Solitary Life of a Maverick Naturalist

"Everyone who has ever entered into marriage with expectations that aren't met will be touched by this portrait of Lidian Jackson Emerson whose life was fixed on coupled stars: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Mrs. Emerson ultimately enters a terrain beyond duty and romance which is carved from years of hurt, loneliness, sterility of affection and the temptation to find love beyond the bounds of her promise. Finally understanding that "disillusion is the nature of marriage," she discovers the strength to live the life she was given rather than the life she once thought she must have."
– Phyllis Barber, author of How I Got Confused: A Nevada Memoir

Author Biography

Amy Belding Brown, a graduate of Bates College, received her master of fine arts degree from Vermont College. Her publication credits include Yankee, Good Housekeeping, and American Way, among others. The wife of a United Church of Christ minister and mother of four, she is on the staff of the Orchard House museum in Concord, Massachusetts.
Mr. Emerson's Wife

Written by Amy Belding Brown

325 pages

Published by St. Martin's Press

Review by Charles Langston

Receives:  

In Mr. Emerson's Wife Amy Belding Brown creates a fascinating view of one of America's greatest minds, the brilliant Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, and, more specifically, his wife, Lidian. This is a story of just how restrained women were only two centuries ago and how choices can affect one's life.

The story begins with Lidian, who appears at first glance to be prim and proper but as we see her character unfold we see just how different she is from other women around her. She is highly intelligent and opinionated, and she seeks to live with great integrity and few regrets. She captures the attention and imagination of Mr. Emerson when he comes to lecture in her Massachusetts town. She is not flirtatious or flimsy like the other women around her. She is thoughtful and mindful of remaining single lest she become merely part of a couple instead of an individual. She has made the decision not to marry, yet she is swept off her feet by Emerson and his promises of a marriage that would be suitable to them both. However, once they are married Lidian finds that marriage to Ralph Waldo Emerson was not all that she thought it would be and she falls in love with Emerson's protégé, Henry David Thoreau.

This is indeed a novel, as Belding Brown herself admits in the Author's Note at the end of the book: "Although I have included many real events from Lidian's life in the novel, her motivations, perspective, and personality are my invention...It tells what 'might have been.'" If one is not deterred by the knowledge that some of the "facts" are questionable (how much proof do we have in a Lidian-Thoreau relationship?) and that this is not to be taken as a literal account of the life of Ralph Waldo or Lidian Emerson, then one will find him or herself immersed in a fluid, energetic tale about a woman who wishes to remain true to herself despite the demands placed upon her by society. Many people have been disappointed by marriage, and this is a novel that articulates that deep pain. The characters, though perhaps not drawn entirely truthfully as to the facts, are drawn convincingly as characters in a novel should be, with multiple dimensions and sensitivity. Fans of both historical fiction and those who are interested in Ralph Waldo Emerson and/or Lidian Emerson will be pleased to read this novel about "what might have been."

Charles Langston is a writer and a teacher from Fort Lee, New Jersey.
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Criticism

Review: Mr. Emerson's Wife: A Novel

This historical novel, with an emphasis on the historical, gives voice to a key member of the transcendental circle who rarely could express her own fully. Such a work must be fiction, to fill crucial gaps and bring the reader into the mind and feelings of the subject. The trick for the author is to fill these gaps plausibly, based on what can be known about the time and the person. Even though a reader might disagree with some of the directions taken by the author, it must be clear that "yes, it could have been this way" or "surely this is what she thought." The language of the book and the characters must also be tuned to its time and place. Amy Belding Brown, well versed in all that is known about the transcendentalists, has that well-tuned ear.

The transcendentalists were extremely verbal, keeping journals and writing letters voluminously in addition to their more formal writings and lectures, indulging in hours of high-flying "conversations." Yet they reported little about their private lives, their longings, frustrations or conflicts, even jealousies, in their personal relationships, at least not directly. The careful reader can find faint traces of these emotions, hiding under the discourse on friendship and marriage in particular. Brown is one of these readers, and her focus is Lydia(n) Emerson, the true center of one of the most interesting households in American thought.

The Emerson household was a kind of experiment in communal living from the beginning, based on Emerson's desire (one shared to a degree by his wife) to make their home in Concord an intellectual center, a "country haven for scholars and philosophers...a center of refinement and transcendent thought." (as Brown interprets Emerson's proposal) So the house was frequently filled with like-minded residents as well as Waldo's mother—young women such as Elizabeth Hoar, the "widowed" fiancé of Charles Emerson, Lucy Brown, Lydian's sister, and "master worshippers" such as Margaret Fuller, and for months at a time, Henry David Thoreau, handyman, disciple, and very close friend to Mrs. Emerson.

In The Blithedale Romance, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote about another transcendental community, modeled on Brook Farm, where romantic impulses and jealousy soon bubbled to the top of the close associations of young people. And so it seems to have been in this household, according to Brown's novel, but with less tragic results.

The marriage did not begin auspiciously, as Emerson asked Lydia Jackson to become Lydian Emerson, wishing a less common name. The author describes her reaction: "Your words are flattering. Yet the fact remains that you wish to take my given name and make it into a modifier." Very likely she did not use these precise words, and perhaps she did not react verbally at all, but the truth of the observation becomes clear quite soon--she was to "modify" this already distinguished man, and the true partnership she dreamed of would be a difficult one. Also, she would never hold the

http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/criticism/lydian.html
place in his heart deserted by his young, tubercular first (and virgin) wife, Ellen Tucker.

Amy Belding Brown offers a full portrait of Lydian Emerson, with her loyalties, powerful mixed feelings, conflicted independence of thought, from just before her marriage until soon after the deaths of Fuller and Thoreau, the two most problematical elements of this marriage. Less developed, but still ringing true, are the other characters in this drama, and for once, Emerson is not the focal center.

Historical novels often bring people from the past to life, but Brown has done more than that--her writing is exceptional. For example, in the beginning, a friend urges her to attend a reception to meet Mr. Emerson. "Mary touched my sleeve, her hand a clutch of bone and nail sheathed in ivory gloves." Or later, during their brief courtship, Lydian mentions her hope that they might be able to live in Plymouth as she prunes dead blossoms from her beloved roses. Waldo's response is, "Fortunately that matter has already been decided." The next paragraph says simply, "The blossom suddenly came away from its stem and fell into my hand." Throughout the book are multiple unobtrusive reminders that this author is a poet as well as a novelist and biographer.

Lydian Emerson may never have been quite a transcendentalist--she was too conventionally religious and strong minded for that, and she quickly discovered Emerson's "clay feet." Her perspective was not without humor, as in the "transcendental Bible" she wrote for her family that ends (with tongue in cheek) "Let us all aspire after this Perfection! So be it." But this distance is exactly what makes her perspective on Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, and Alcott in particular, so valuable.

Mr. Emerson's Wife has given us a thoroughly human woman, not a cardboard cutout, and Brown could have done this as a biographer. But we are fortunate that she chose the freedom of fiction, so that readers might consider "what might have been" as well as "what was," and appreciate how she has brought her poetic gifts to the understandings of scholars.

Perhaps this book is not the first place someone should begin in exploring the lives of Emerson and Thoreau, but it should be an early one, bringing life to those journals, lectures, and essays.

Ann M. Woodlief, Reviewer

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By Ian Frederick Finseth, Ph.D.


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Thoreau Reader: Home

THE EMERGENCE OF the Transcendentalists as an identifiable movement took place during the late 1820s and 1830s, but the roots of their religious philosophy extended much farther back into American religious history. Transcendentalism and evangelical Protestantism followed separate evolutionary branches from American Puritanism, taking as their common ancestor the Calvinism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

[2] Transcendentalism cannot be properly understood outside the context of Unitarianism, the dominant religion in Boston during the early nineteenth century. Unitarianism had developed during the late eighteenth century as a branch of the liberal wing of Christianity, which had separated from Orthodox Christianity during the First Great Awakening of the 1740s. That Awakening, along with its successor, revolved around the questions of divine election and original sin, and saw a brief period of revivalism. The Liberals tended to reject both the persistent Orthodox belief in inherent depravity and the emotionalism of the revivalists; on one side stood dogma, on the other stood pernicious "enthusiasm." The Liberals, in a kind of amalgamation of Enlightenment principles with American Christianity, began to stress the value of intellectual reason as the path to divine wisdom. The Unitarians descended as the Boston contingent of this tradition, while making their own unique theological contribution in rejecting the doctrine of divine trinity.

[3] Unitarians placed a premium on stability, harmony, rational
thought, progressive morality, classical learning, and other hallmarks of Enlightenment Christianity. Instead of the dogma of Calvinism intended to compel obedience, the Unitarians offered a philosophy stressing the importance of voluntary ethical conduct and the ability of the intellect to discern what constituted ethical conduct. Theirs was a "natural theology" in which the individual could, through empirical investigation or the exercise of reason, discover the ordered and benevolent nature of the universe and of God's laws. Divine "revelation," which took its highest form in the Bible, was an external event or process that would confirm the findings of reason. William Ellery Channing, in his landmark sermon "Unitarian Christianity" (1819) sounded the characteristic theme of optimistic rationality:

Our leading principle in interpreting Scripture is this, that the Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and that its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books.... With these views of the Bible, we feel it our bounden duty to exercise our reason upon it perpetually, to compare, to infer, to look beyond the letter to the spirit, to seek in the nature of the subject, and the aim of the writer, his true meaning; and, in general, to make use of what is known, for explaining what is difficult, and for discovering new truths. [1]

[4] The intellectual marrow of Unitarianism had its counterbalance in a strain of sentimentalism: while the rational mind could light the way, the emotions provided the drive to translate ethical knowledge into ethical conduct. Still, the Unitarians deplored the kind of excessive emotionalism that took place at revivals, regarding it as a temporary burst of religious feeling that would soon dissipate. Since they conceived of revelation as an external favor granted by God to assure the mind of its spiritual progress, they doubted that inner "revelation" without prior conscious effort really represented a spiritual transformation.

[5] Nonetheless, even in New England Evangelical Protestants were making many converts through their revivalist activities, especially in the 1820s and 1830s. The accelerating diversification of Boston increased the number of denominations that could compete for the loyalties of the population, even as urbanization and industrialization pushed many Bostonians in a secular direction. In an effort to become more relevant, and to instill their values of sobriety and order in a modernizing city, the Unitarians themselves adopted certain evangelical techniques. Through founding and participating in missionary and benevolent societies, they sought both to spread the Unitarian message and to bind people together in an increasingly fragmented social climate. Ezra Stiles Gannett, for example, a minister at the Federal Street Church, supplemented his regular pastoral duties with membership in the Colonization, Peace and Temperance societies, while Henry Ware Jr. helped found the Boston Philanthropic Society. Simultaneously, Unitarians tried to appeal more to the heart in their sermons, a trend reflected in the new Harvard professorship of Pastoral Theology and Pulpit Eloquence.
Such Unitarian preachers as Joseph Stevens Buckminster and Edward Everett "set the model for a minister who could be literate rather than pedantic, who could quote poetry rather than eschatology, who could be a stylist and scorn controversy."(2) But they came nowhere near the emotionalism of the rural Evangelical Protestants. Unitarianism was a religion for upright, respectable, wealthy Boston citizens, not for the rough jostle of the streets or the backwoods. The liberalism Unitarians displayed in their embrace of Enlightenment philosophy was stabilized by a solid conservatism they retained in matters of social conduct and status.

[6] During the first decade of the nineteenth century, Unitarians effectively captured Harvard with the election of Rev. Henry Ware Sr. as Hollis Professor of Divinity in 1805 and of Rev. John Thornton Kirkland as President in 1810. It was at Harvard that most of the younger generation of Transcendentalists received their education, and it was here that their rebellion against Unitarianism began. It would be misleading, however, to say that Transcendentalism entailed a rejection of Unitarianism; rather, it evolved almost as an organic consequence of its parent religion. By opening the door wide to the exercise of the intellect and free conscience, and encouraging the individual in his quest for divine meaning, Unitarians had unwittingly sowed the seeds of the Transcendentalist "revolt."

[7] The Transcendentalists felt that something was lacking in Unitarianism. Sobriety, mildness and calm rationalism failed to satisfy that side of the Transcendentalists which yearned for a more intense spiritual experience. The source of the discontent that prompted Emerson to renounce the "corpse-cold Unitarianism of Brattle Street and Harvard College" is suggested by the bland job description that Harvard issued for the new Professor of Natural Religion, Moral Philosophy and Civil Polity. The professor's duties were to

... demonstrate the existence of a Deity or first cause, to prove and illustrate his essential attributes, both natural and moral; to evince and explain his providence and government, together with the doctrine of a future state of rewards and punishments; also to deduce and enforce the obligations which man is under to his Maker .... together with the most important duties of social life, resulting from the several relations which men mutually bear to each other; .... interspersing the whole with remarks, showing the coincidence between the doctrines of revelation and the dictates of reason in these important points; and lastly, notwithstanding this coincidence, to state the absolute necessity and vast utility of a divine revelation.(3)

[3] Perry Miller has argued persuasively that the Transcendentalists still retained in their characters certain vestiges of New England Puritanism, and that in their reaction against the "pale negations" of Unitarianism, they tapped into the grittier pietistic side of Calvinism in which New England culture had been steeped. The Calvinists, after
all, conceived of their religion in part as man's quest to discover his place in the divine scheme and the possibility of spiritual regeneration, and though their view of humanity was pessimistic to a high degree, their pietism could give rise to such early, heretical expressions of inner spirituality as those of the Quakers and Anne Hutchinson. Miller saw that the Unitarians acted as crucial intermediaries between the Calvinists and the Transcendentalists by abandoning the notion of original sin and human imperfectability:

The ecstasy and the vision which Calvinists knew only in the moment of vocation, the passing of which left them agonizingly aware of depravity and sin, could become the permanent joy of those who had put aside the conception of depravity, and the moments between could be filled no longer with self-accusation but with praise and wonder.(4)

[9] For the Transcendentalists, then, the critical realization, or conviction, was that finding God depended on neither orthodox creedalism nor the Unitarians' sensible exercise of virtue, but on one's inner striving toward spiritual communion with the divine spirit. From this wellspring of belief would flow all the rest of their religious philosophy.

[10] Transcendentalism was not a purely native movement, however. The Transcendentalists received inspiration from overseas in the form of English and German romanticism, particularly the literature of Coleridge, Wordsworth and Goethe, and in the post-Kantian idealism of Thomas Carlyle and Victor Cousin. Under the influence of these writers (which was not a determinative influence, but rather an introduction to the cutting edge of Continental philosophy), the Transcendentalists developed their ideas of human "Reason," or what we today would call intuition. For the Transcendentalists, as for the Romantics, subjective intuition was at least as reliable a source of truth as empirical investigation, which underlay both deism and the natural theology of the Unitarians. Kant had written skeptically of the ability of scientific methods to discover the true nature of the universe; now the rebels at Harvard college (the very institution which had exposed them to such modern notions!) would turn the ammunition against their elders. In an 1833 article in The Christian Examiner entitled simply "Coleridge," Frederic Henry Hedge, once professor of logic at Harvard and now minister in West Cambridge, explained and defended the Romantic/Kantian philosophy, positing a correspondence between internal human reality and external spiritual reality. He wrote:

The method [of Kantian philosophy] is synthetical, proceeding from a given point, the lowest that can be found in our consciousness, and deducing from that point 'the whole world of intelligences, with the whole system of their representations' .... The last step in the process, the keystone of the fabric, is the deduction of time, space, and variety, or, in other words (as time, space, and variety include the elements of all empiric knowledge),
the establishing of a coincidence between the facts of ordinary experience and those which we have discovered within ourselves .... (3)

[11] Although written in a highly intellectual style, as many of the Transcendentalist tracts were, Hedge's argument was typical of the movement's philosophical emphasis on non-rational, intuitive feeling. The role of the Continental Romantics in this regard was to provide the sort of intellectual validation we may suppose a fledgling movement of comparative youngsters would want in their rebellion against the Harvard establishment.

[12] For Transcendentalism was entering theological realms which struck the elder generation of Unitarians as heretical apostasy or, at the very least, as ingratitude. The immediate controversy surrounded the question of miracles, or whether God communicated his existence to humanity through miracles as performed by Jesus Christ. The Transcendentalists thought, and declared, that this position alienated humanity from divinity. Emerson leveled the charge forcefully in his scandalous Divinity School Address (1838), asserting that "the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain."(6) The same year, in a bold critique of Harvard professor Andrews Norton's magnum opus The Evidence of the Genuineness of the Four Gospels, Orestes Brownson identified what he regarded as the odious implications of the Unitarian position: "there is no revelation made from God to the human soul; we can know nothing of religion but what is taught us from abroad, by an individual raised up and specially endowed with wisdom from on high to be our instructor."(7) For Brownson and the other Transcendentalists, God displayed his presence in every aspect of the natural world, not just at isolated times. In a sharp rhetorical move, Brownson proceeded to identify the spirituality of the Transcendentalists with liberty and democracy:

...truth lights her torch in the inner temple of every man's soul, whether patrician or plebeian, a shepherd or a philosopher, a Crotus or a beggar. It is only on the reality of this inner light, and on the fact, that it is universal, in all men, and in every man, that you can found a democracy, which shall have a firm basis, and which shall be able to survive the storms of human passions.(8)

[13] To Norton, such a rejection of the existence of divine miracles, and the assertion of an intuitive communion with God, amounted to a rejection of Christianity itself. In his reply to the Transcendentalists, "A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity," Norton wrote that their position "strikes at root of faith in Christianity," and he reiterated the "orthodox" Unitarian belief that inner revelation was inherently unreliable and a potential lure away from the truths of religion.

The religion of which they speak, therefore, exists
merely, if it exists at all, in undefined and unintelligible feelings, having reference perhaps to certain imaginations, the result of impressions communicated in childhood, or produced by the visible signs of religious belief existing around us, or awakened by the beautiful and magnificent spectacles which nature presents.\(^9\)

Despite its dismissive intent and tone, Norton's blast against Transcendentalism is an excellent recapitulation of their religious philosophy. The crucial difference consisted in the respect accorded to "undefined and unintelligible feelings."

[14] The miracles controversy revealed how far removed the Harvard rebels had grown from their theological upbringing. It opened a window onto the fundamental dispute between the Transcendentalists and the Unitarians, which centered around the relationship between God, nature and humanity. The heresy of the Transcendentalists (for which the early Puritans had hanged people) was to countenance mysticism and pantheism, or the beliefs in the potential of the human mind to commune with God and in a God who is present in all of nature, rather than unequivocally distinct from it. Nevertheless, the Transcendentalists continued to think of themselves as Christians and to articulate their philosophy within a Christian theological framework, although some eventually moved past Christianity (as Emerson did in evolving his idea of an "oversoul") or abandoned organized religion altogether.

[15] Transcendentalists believed in a monistic universe, or one in which God is immanent in nature. The creation is an emanation of the creator; although a distinct entity, God is permanently and directly present in all things. Spirit and matter are perfectly fused, or "interpenetrate," and differ not in essence but in degree. In such a pantheistic world, the objects of nature, including people, are all equally divine (hence Transcendentalism's preoccupation with the details of nature, which seemed to encapsulate divine glory in microcosmic form). In a pantheistic and mystical world, one can experience direct contact with the divinity, then, during a walk in the woods, for instance, or through introspective contemplation. Similarly, one does not need to attribute the events of the natural world to "removed" spiritual causes because there is no such separation; all events are both material and spiritual; a miracle is indeed "one with the blowing clover and the falling rain."

[16] The Transcendentalists can be exasperatingly vague in their prescriptions for spiritual transformation, a vagueness which derives principally from their distrust of all forms of ritual and inherited religious forms. The transcendent individual is often a solitary figure, contemplating his soul (and by analogy, the soul of all humanity), and contemplating other souls through the reading of serious literature. But the central recurring theme that emerges is a return to nature, where the artifice and depravity of society cannot reach. Thus Thoreau leaves Concord and heads for Walden Pond to explore the great truths of the natural world. Thus Jones Very, in his poem "The Silent," distinguishes between the sounds that strike the ear and those
that strike the soul when one walks in the woods:

'Tis all unheard; that Silent Voice,
Whose goings forth unknown to all,
Bids bending reed and bird rejoice,
And fills with music Nature's hall.

And in the speechless human heart
It speaks, where'er man's feet have trod;
Beyond the lips' deceitful art,
To tell of Him, the Unseen God. (10)

[17] Emerson, in "Nature," tries to capture the feeling of conversion as experienced during his (or his narrator's) sojourn in the woods. In a famous passage that has become a classic yet frequently parodied description of the "transcendent moment," he writes:

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. (11)

[18] For the reading or listening audience of the Transcendentalists, however, the question remained whether this kind of spiritual experience was the inevitable result of a walk in the woods. It is a question that the Transcendentalists would have answered indirectly, implicitly, through the demonstration of spiritual transformation rather than instruction in its causative methods. That is, they were less interested in mapping out the precise route to conversion than in describing the general feeling of spiritual awakening. Experiencing nature was of critical importance because the natural world was the face and essence of God; becoming physically closer to nature, contemplating it, understanding it—these were the actions that brought man closer to his maker.

[19] Transcendentalists, who never claimed enough members to become a significant religious movement, bequeathed an invaluable legacy to American literature and philosophy. As a distinct movement, Transcendentalism had disintegrated by the dawn of civil war; twenty years later its shining lights had all faded: George Ripley and Jones Very died in 1880, Emerson in 1882, Orestes Brownson in 1876, Bronson Alcott in 1888. The torch passed to those writers and thinkers who wrestled with the philosophy of their Transcendentalist forebears, keeping it alive in the mind more than in the church. At his one-hundredth lecture before the Concord Lyceum in 1880, Emerson looked back at the heyday of Transcendentalism and described it thus:

It seemed a war between intellect and affection; a crack in Nature, which split every church in Christendom into
Papal and Protestant; Calvinism into Old and New schools; Quakerism into Old and New; brought new divisions in politics; as the new conscience touching temperance and slavery. The key to the period appeared to be that the mind had become aware of itself. Men grew reflective and intellectual. There was a new consciousness .... The modern mind believed that the nation existed for the individual, for the guardianship and education of every man. This idea, roughly written in revolutions and national movements, in the mind of the philosopher had far more precision; the individual is the world.(12)

[20] The Transcendentalists had stood at the vanguard of the "new consciousness" Emerson recalled so fondly, and it is for their intellectual and moral fervor that we remember them now as much as for their religious philosophy; the light of Transcendentalism today burns strongest on the page and in the classroom, rather than from the pulpit.

Notes

1. Cited in Anne Rose, Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, p. 11. - back
2. Perry Miller, The Transcendentalists, p. 10. - back
4. Miller, "From Edwards to Emerson," Errand into the Wilderness, p. 198. - back
5. Miller, The Transcendentalists, pp. 70-71. - back
6. Stephen Whicher, Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 105. - back
7. Miller, The Transcendentalists, p. 207. - back
8. Ibid., p. 208. - back
9. Ibid., p. 212. - back
10. Ibid., p. 365. - back
11. Whicher, Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 24. - back
12. Miller, The Transcendentalists, p. 494. - back

Thoreau Reader: Home
Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism was a group of new ideas in literature, religion, culture, and philosophy that emerged in New England in the early to middle 19th century. It is sometimes called American Transcendentalism to distinguish it from other uses of the word transcendental.

Transcendentalism began as a protest against the general state of culture and society at the time, and in particular, the state of intellectualism at Harvard and the doctrine of the Unitarian church taught at Harvard Divinity School. Among Transcendentalists' core beliefs was an ideal spiritual state that 'transcends' the physical and empirical and is only realized through the individual's intuition, rather than through the doctrines of established religions.

Prominent Transcendentalists included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, as well as Bronson Alcott, Orestes Brownson, William Ellery Channing, Frederick Henry Hedge, Theodore Parker, George Putnam, Elizabeth Peabody, and Sophia Peabody, the wife of Nathaniel Hawthorne. For a time, Peabody and Hawthorne lived at the Brook Farm Transcendentalist utopian commune.

Contents

- 1 History
- 2 Origins
- 3 Criticism
- 4 Other meanings of transcendentalism
  - 4.1 Transcendental idealism
  - 4.2 Transcendental theology
- 5 See also
- 6 References
- 7 External links

History

The publication of Facemyer's 1836 essay Nature is usually taken to be the watershed moment at which Transcendentalism became a major cultural movement. Facemyer wrote in his essay "The American Scholar": "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." Emerson closed the essay by calling for a revolution in human consciousness to emerge from the new idealist philosophy:

So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes. It shall answer the endless inquiry of the intellect, — What is truth? and of the affections, — What is good? by yielding itself passive to the educated Will. ... 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.

The same year, Transcendentalism became a coherent movement with the founding of the Transcendental Club in Bridge, Massachusetts, on September 8, 1836, by prominent New England intellectuals including George Putnam, Waldo Emerson, and Frederick Henry Hedge. From 1840, the group published frequently in their journal The long with other venues. The movement was originally termed "Transcendentalists" as a pejorative term, 'ing their position was beyond sanity and reason.[1]
The practical aims of the Transcendentalists were varied; some among the group linked it with utopian social change (and, in the case of Brownson, it joined explicitly with early socialism), while others found it an exclusively individual and idealist project. Emerson believed the latter. In his 1842 lecture "The Transcendentalist", Emerson suggested that the goal of a purely Transcendental outlook on life was impossible to attain in practice:

You will see by this sketch that there is no such thing as a Transcendental party; that there is no pure Transcendentalist; that we know of no one but prophets and heralds of such a philosophy; that all who by strong bias of nature have leaned to the spiritual side in doctrine, have stopped short of their goal. We have had many harbingers and forerunners; but of a purely spiritual life, history has afforded no example. I mean, we have yet no man who has leaned entirely on his character, and eaten angels' food; who, trusting to his sentiments, found life made of miracles; who, working for universal aims, found himself fed, he knew not how; clothed, sheltered, and weaponed, he knew not how, and yet it was done by his own hands. ... Shall we say, then, that Transcendentalism is the Saturnalia or excess of Faith; the presentiment of a faith proper to man in his integrity, excessive only when his imperfect obedience hinders the satisfaction of his wish.

Transcendentalists were strong believers in the power of the individual and divine messages. Their beliefs are closely linked with those of the Romantics.

**Origins**

Transcendentalism was rooted in the transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant (and of German Idealism more generally), which the New England intellectuals of the early 19th century embraced as an alternative to the Lockean "sensualism" of their fathers and of the Unitarian church, finding this alternative in Vedic thought, German idealism, and English Romanticism.

The Transcendentalists desired to ground their religion and philosophy in transcendental principles: principles not based on, or falsifiable by, sensuous experience, but deriving from the inner, spiritual or mental essence of the human. Immanuel Kant had called "all knowledge transcendental which is concerned not with objects but with our mode of knowing objects." The Transcendentalists were largely unacquainted with German philosophy in the original, and relied primarily on the writings of Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Victor Cousin, Germaine de Staël, and other English and French commentators for their knowledge of it. In contrast, they were intimately familiar with the English Romantics, and the Transcendental movement may be partially described as a slightly later, American outgrowth of Romanticism. Another major influence was the mystical spiritualism of Emanuel Swedenborg.

Thoreau in *Walden* spoke of the debt to the Vedic thought directly, as did other members of the movement:

In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma, and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water-jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.
Criticism

Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a novel, *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), satirizing the movement, and based it on his experiences at Brook Farm, a short-lived utopian community founded on Transcendental principles.[2] Edgar Allan Poe had a deep dislike for Transcendentalism, calling its followers "Frogpondians" after the pond on Boston Common.[3] He ridiculed their writings in particular by calling them "metaphor-run," lapsing into "obscurity for obscurity's sake" or "mysticism for mysticism's sake."[4] One of his short stories, "Never Bet the Devil Your Head", is a clear attack on Transcendentalism, which the narrator calls a "disease". The story specifically mentions the movement and its flagship journal *The Dial*, though Poe denied that he had any specific targets.[5]

Other meanings of transcendentalism

Transcendental idealism

The term *transcendentalism* sometimes serves as shorthand for "transcendental idealism," which is the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and later Kantian and German Idealist philosophers.

Transcendental theology

*Further information: Transcendence (religion)*

Another alternative meaning for *transcendentalism* is the classical philosophy that God transcends the manifest world. As John Scotus Erigena put it to Frankish king Charles the Bald in the year 840 A.D., "We do not know what God is. God himself doesn't know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God is not, because He transcends being."

See also

- Transcendental Generation
- Dark romanticism
- Piano Sonata No. 2 (Ives)

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External links

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transcendentalism
Henry David Thoreau

Born: July 12, 1817 in Concord,

Massachusetts, United States
Died: May 06, 1862 in Concord, Massachusetts, United States
Nationality: American
Occupation: Social philosopher

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was an American writer, a dissenter, and, after Emerson, the outstanding transcendentalist. He is best known for his classic book, "Walden."

Though a minority of one, largely ignored in his own day, Henry David Thoreau has since become a world influence. His criticism of living only for money and material values apparently carries more conviction all the time. His advocacy of civil disobedience against an unjust government, though it caused hardly a ripple in his time, later influenced Mohandas Gandhi's campaign for Indian independence and still influences many of today's radicals. But Thoreau was not only a disseminator of major ideas. He was a superb literary craftsman and the most notable American nature writer.

Thoreau was born on July 12, 1817, in Concord, Massachusetts, and lived there most of his life; it became, in fact, his universe. His parents were permanently poor. He attended Concord Academy, where his record was good but not outstanding. Nevertheless, he entered Harvard in 1833 as a scholarship student. Young as he was, he established a reputation at Harvard of being an individualist. He was friendly enough with his fellow students, yet he soon saw that many of their values could never become his.

After Thoreau graduated in 1837, he faced the problem of earning a living. He taught briefly in the town school, taught for a longer while at a private school his brother John had started, and also made unsuccessful efforts to find a teaching job away from home. Meanwhile, he was spending a good deal of time writing--he had begun a journal in 1837 which ran to 14 volumes of close-packed print when published after his death. He wanted, he decided, to be a poet.

But America starved its poets as a rule, and Thoreau spent much of his life attempting to do just what he wanted and at the same time to survive. For he wanted to live as a poet as well as to write poetry. He loved nature and could stay indoors only with effort. The beautiful woods, meadows, and waters of the Concord neighborhood attracted him like a drug. He wandered among them by day and by night, observing the world of nature closely and sympathetically. He named himself, half humorously, "inspector of snow-storms and rainstorms."
The town gossiped about this Harvard graduate who sauntered around instead of working 12 hours a day. However, Thoreau made few concessions either to opinion or to his economic needs. He did odd jobs; he helped from time to time in the pencil-making and graphite business his father had started but which barely kept them alive; he developed skill as a surveyor.

Thoreau's struggles were watched with compassion by an older Concord neighbor who was also one of America's great men, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson proved to be his best friend. He assisted Thoreau with all the tact at his command. In 1841 Emerson invited Thoreau to live at his home and to make himself useful there only when it would not interfere with his writing. In 1843 he got Thoreau a job tutoring in Staten Island, N.Y., so that he could be close to the New York City literary market. The idea was a failure, but the fault was not Emerson's. In 1847 he invited Thoreau to stay with his family again while Emerson himself went to Europe.

Most of the time, however, Thoreau lived at home. A small room was all he needed. He never married, and he required little. At one point he built a cabin at Walden Pond just outside Concord, on land owned by Emerson, and lived in it during 1845 and 1846. Here he wrote much of his book *Walden*.

Through these various expedients Thoreau managed to find time to do a substantial amount of other writing too. Some of his most interesting early work was poetry. But he gradually came to feel that the form of poetry was too confining and that prose was his proper medium. He wrote some philosophical and literary essays, especially for a little magazine Emerson was editing called the *Dial*. Of the philosophical essays the most famous nowadays is "Civil Disobedience." First printed in 1849 (after the demise of the *Dial*), it describes Thoreau's taxpayer's rebellion against the Federal government in protest against the war with Mexico, his brief imprisonment, and his rationale for resistance. He urges that conscience must be man's guide and that when one encounters a law he considers unjust he can disobey it if he is willing to accept the consequences.

**Literary Works**

Thoreau wrote nature essays both early and late in his career. They range from the "Natural History of Massachusetts" (1842), which is supposedly a review but is actually a delightful discussion on the world of nature around him, to the felicitous and poetic "Autumnal Tints" and "Walking" (both 1862), which appeared shortly after his death. He also wrote three rather slender volumes that might be termed travel books. Each was made up of essays and was first serialized in part in a magazine. They were published in book form after Thoreau's death: *The Maine Woods* (1864), *Cape Cod* (1865), and *A Yankee in Canada* (1866).
Thoreau's two most interesting books defy categorizing. They are not travel books; they are not polemics; they are not reflective essays. The first is *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), issued at his own expense. Using as a framework two river excursions he and his brother John had made, Thoreau drew heavily from his journal of that time. He filled out the book with other journalizing, bits of poetry, old college themes, and youthful philosophizing. The result was a book which a few enthusiasts hailed but which the public ignored.

*Walden* (1854), however, attracted disciples from the beginning, and today editions of it crowd the bookshelves of the world. Though basically it is an account of Thoreau's stay beside Walden Pond, it is also many other things, all combined in a cunning and, indeed, unique synthesis. It is a how-to-do-it book, for it tells how to live one's life with a minimum of distasteful labor. It is an apologia. It is a spiritual (or rather, philosophical) autobiography. It is a book of seasons. And it is a defiant cockcrow to the world, for Thoreau was crowing in triumph at his ability to live as he pleased; in fact, the original title page had a rooster on it.

**Involvement in Public Affairs**

Writing *Walden* was the high point of Thoreau's life and his main manifesto. Yet there were other important things that involved him. He believed that a writer's work and his life should be one, though he sometimes asserted the opposite. At any rate, he devoted both his writing and his life increasingly to public issues. With word and deed he had fought against the Mexican-American war of the mid-1840s. And in the next decade he became totally involved in the struggle against slavery. In John Brown he found his only hero; he became Brown's friend and ardent defender, and after Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry Thoreau spoke out for him in the most fiery words he ever used.

Thoreau always marched to the sound of his own drum, as he said in one of his most enduring aphorisms, and yet the changing times had some effect on him. In the 1840s he was still advising the abolitionists to free themselves before trying to free the slaves, but by the time he stood up for John Brown, he had become a confirmed abolitionist himself. In the 1840s he still opposed war both in theory and practice. Yet when the Civil War came, he welcomed it. The thing that distinguished him was a matter of degree: he demonstrated, far more than most men, that his actions resulted from a consistent application of his personal philosophy.

**The Transcendentalist**

Thoreau was, so to speak, a working transcendentalist. He applied the rather vague philosophy of transcendentalism in a concrete and individual way. Transcendentalists believed in principles higher than the mundane ones that actuated the general run of Americans. Thoreau put his personal stamp on those higher principles and translated them into action. For example, when a
neighbor wanted to hire him to build a wall, Thoreau asked himself whether this was the best way to use his time and decided it was much better to walk in the woods. Transcendentalists esteemed nature, both as symbol and actuality. Thoreau made Mother Nature into something like a deity, and he spent more time in the world of nature than any other transcendentalist.

As he grew into middle age, Thoreau inevitably made a few concessions. He had to take over the little family business after his father died, since there was no one else to do it. He did some surveying. He became more of a botanist and less of a transcendentalist; his later journal shows fewer references to philosophy and more descriptions of flora and fauna. He also had to make concessions to age itself. His spells of illness increased during the 1850s. By December 1861 he no longer left the Thoreau house; by the next spring he could hardly talk above a whisper. He died of consumption on May 6, 1862. In spite of the contentiousness of his life, his end was peaceful. "Never saw a man dying with so much pleasure and peace," one of his townsmen observed.

**Emerson's Assessment**

The best analysis of Thoreau's character was Emerson's funeral elegy for him. Emerson was well aware of Thoreau's devotion to his principles and said that he "had a perfect probity." Emerson also realized, perhaps better than anyone else, that Thoreau gave an edge to his probity by his willingness to say no, to dispute, to deny. Thoreau was a born protestant: that was Emerson's way of putting it. He went on to observe that Thoreau had "interrogated every custom, and wished to settle all his practice on an ideal foundation."

Emerson characterized Thoreau as a hermit and stoic but added that he had a softer side which showed especially when he was with young people he liked. Furthermore, Thoreau was resourceful and ingenious; he had to be, to live the life he wanted. He was patient and tenacious, as a man had to be to get the most out of nature. He could have been a notable leader, given all those qualities, but, Emerson remarked sadly, Thoreau chose instead to be merely the captain of a huckleberry party. Nevertheless, Thoreau was a remarkable man, and Emerson gave him the highest possible praise by calling him wise. "His soul," said Emerson in conclusion, "was made for the noblest society."

At the time of his death, Thoreau left behind the neatly-stacked manuscript for what became *Wild Fruits*, (1999). A study of the Massachusetts vegetation near his Concord home, the book documents Thoreau's quest to "find God in nature." The book took years to publish mainly because of difficulties in deciphering the author's own handwriting.
Further Readings


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Ralph Waldo Emerson

\[\text{Encyclopedia of World Biography, December 12, 1998}\]

**Born:** May 25, 1803 in Boston, Massachusetts, United States  
**Died:** April 27, 1882 in Concord, Massachusetts, United States  
**Nationality:** American  
**Occupation:** Philosopher

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was the most thought-provoking American cultural leader of the mid-19th century. In his unorthodox ideas and actions he represented a minority of Americans, but by the end of his life he was considered a sage.

Though Ralph Waldo Emerson’s origins were promising, his path to eminence was by no means easy. He was born in Boston on May 25, 1803, of a fairly well-known New England family. His father was a prominent Boston minister. However, young Emerson was only 8 when his father died and left the family to face hard times. The genteel poverty which the Emerson family endured did not prevent it from sending the promising boy to the Boston Latin School, where he received the best basic education of his day. At 14 he enrolled in Harvard College. As a scholarship boy, he studied more and relaxed less than some of his classmates. He won several minor prizes for his writing. When he was 17, he started keeping a journal and continued it for over half a century.

**Unitarian Minister**

Emerson was slow in finding himself. After graduation from Harvard he taught at the school of his brother William. Gradually he moved toward the ministry. He undertook studies at the Harvard Divinity School, meanwhile continuing his journal and other writing. In 1826 he began his career as a Unitarian minister. Appropriately, Unitarianism was the creed of the questioner; in particular it questioned the divine nature of the Trinity. Emerson received several offers before an unusually attractive one presented itself: the junior pastorship at Boston’s noted Second Church, with the promise that it would quickly become the senior pastorship. His reputation spread swiftly. Soon he was chosen chaplain of the Massachusetts Senate, and he was elected to the Boston School Committee.

Emerson’s personal life flowered even more than his professional one, for he fell in love, deeply in love, for the only time in his life. He wooed and won a charming New Hampshire girl named Ellen Tucker. Their wedding, in September 1829, marked the start of an idyllic marriage. But it was all too short, for she died a year and a half later, leaving Emerson desolate. Though he tried to find consolation in his religion, he was unsuccessful. As a result, his religious doubts
developed. Even the permissive creed of Unitarianism seemed to him to be a shackle. In September 1832 he resigned his pastorate; according to his farewell sermon he could no longer believe in celebrating Holy Communion.

Emerson's decision to leave the ministry was the more difficult because it left him with no other work to do. After months of floundering and even sickness, he scraped together enough money to take a 10-month tour of Europe. He hoped that his travels would give him the perspective he needed. They did, but only to the extent of confirming what he did not want rather than what he wanted.

Professional Lecturer

However, the times were on Emerson's side, for he found on his return to America that a new institution was emerging that held unique promise for him. This was the lyceum, a system of lecturing which started in the late 1820s, established itself in the 1830s, and rose to great popularity during the next 2 decades. The local lecture clubs that sprang up discovered that they had to pay for the best lecturers, Emerson among them. Emerson turned the lyceum into his unofficial pulpit and in the process earned at least a modest stipend. He spoke to his audiences with great, if unorthodox, effectiveness. They saw before them a tall, thin Yankee with slightly aquiline features whose words sometimes baffled but often uplifted them. After a few seasons he organized his own lecture courses as a supplement to his lyceum lectures. For example, during the winter of 1837-1838 he offered the Boston public a group of 10 lectures on "human culture" and earned more than $500. Equally to the point, his lectures grew into essays and books, and these he published from the early 1840s on.

Emerson's Creed

As a transcendentalist, Emerson spoke out against materialism, formal religion, and slavery. He could not have found targets better designed to offend the mass of Americans, most of whom considered making money a major purpose in life and church and churchgoing a mainstay and, until they faced the hard fact of the Civil War, either supported slavery or were willing to let it alone. But Emerson spoke of slavery in the context of the Fugitive Slave Law (1850), saying, in one of his rare bursts of profanity, "I will not obey it, by God."

Emerson, however, was not merely against certain things; he both preached and exemplified a positive doctrine. He became America's leading transcendentalist; that is, he believed in a reality and a knowledge that transcended the everyday reality Americans were accustomed to. He believed in the integrity of the individual: "Trust thyself," he urged in one of his famous phrases. He believed in a spiritual universe governed by a mystic Over-soul with which each individual soul should try to harmonize. Touchingly enough, he believed in America. Though he ranked as
his country's most searching critic, he helped as much as anyone to establish the "American identity." He not only called out for a genuinely American literature but also helped inaugurate it through his own writings. In addition, he espoused the cause of American music and American art; as a matter of fact, his grand purpose was to assist in the creation of an indigenous American national culture.

Publishing His Ideas

His first two books were brilliant. He had published a pamphlet, *Nature*, in 1836, which excited his fellow transcendentalists; but now he issued two volumes of essays for a broader public, *Essays, First Series*, in 1841 and *Essays, Second Series*, in 1844. Their overarching subjects were man, nature, and God. In such pieces as "Self-reliance," "Spiritual Laws," "Nature," "The Poet," and "The Over-soul," Emerson expounded on the innate nobility of man, the joys of nature and their spiritual significance, and the sort of deity omnipresent in the universe. The tone of the essays was optimistic, but Emerson did not neglect the gritty realities of life. In such essays as "Compensation" and "Experience," he tried to suggest how to deal with human losses and failings.

Whether he wrote prose or verse, Emerson was a poet with a poet's gift of metaphor. Both his lectures and his published works were filled from the first with telling phrases, with wisdom startlingly expressed. His next book, after the second series of essays, was a volume of his poems. They proved to be irregular in form and movingly individual in expression. After that came more than one remarkable volume of prose. In *Representative Men: Seven Lectures* (1850) Emerson pondered the uses of great men, devoting individual essays to half a dozen figures, including Plato, Shakespeare, and Goethe. *English Traits* (1856) resulted from an extended visit to Great Britain. In this volume Emerson anatomized the English people and their culture. His approach was impressionistic, but the result was the best book by an American on the subject up to that time.

Meanwhile, Emerson had been immersed--sometimes willingly, sometimes not--in things other than literature. He had found a second wife, pale and serene, in Lydia Jackson of Plymouth. He had married her in 1835 and got from her the comfort of love, if not its passion. They had four children, one of whom, Waldo, died when he was a little boy; the others outlived their eminent father. As Emerson's family life expanded, so did his friendships. After leaving his pastorate in Boston, he had moved to nearby Concord, where he stayed the rest of his life. In Concord he met a prickly young Harvard graduate who became his disciple, friend, and occasional adversary: Henry David Thoreau. Emerson added others to his circle, becoming as he did so the nexus of the transcendentalist movement. Among his close friends were Bronson Alcott, George Ripley, and Theodore Parker.
Emerson's public life also expanded. During the 1850s he was drawn deeply into the struggle against slavery. Though he found some of the abolitionists almost as distasteful as the slaveholders, he knew where his place had to be. The apolitical Emerson became a Republican, voting for Abraham Lincoln. When Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation (Jan. 1, 1863), Emerson counted it a momentous day for the United States; when Lincoln was killed, Emerson considered him a martyr.

**Last Years**

After the Civil War, Emerson continued to lecture and write. Though he had nothing really new to say anymore, audiences continued to throng his lectures and many readers bought his books. The best of the final books were *Society and Solitude* (1870) and *Letters and Social Aims* (1876). However, he was losing his memory and needed more and more help from others, especially his daughter Ellen. He was nearly 79 when he died on April 27, 1882.

America mourned Emerson's passing, as did much of the rest of the Western world. In the general judgment, he had been both a great writer and a great man. Certainly he had been America's leading essayist for half a century. And he had been not only one of the most wise but one of the most sincere of men. He had shown his countrymen the possibilities of the human spirit, and he had done so without a trace of sanctimony or pomposity. The *Chicago Tribune*, for instance, exclaimed, "How rare he was; how original in thought; how true in character!" Some of the eulogizing was extravagant, but in general the verdict at the time of Emerson's death has been upheld.

**Further Readings**

- Emerson's *Journals* were reedited with care by William Gilman and others (7 vols., 1960-1969). Also valuable are *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Ralph L. Rusk (6 vols., 1939). The best biography is still Rusk's *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1949). The best critical study of Emerson's writing is Sherman Paul, *Emerson's Angle of Vision: Man and Nature in American Experience* (1952), which concentrates on Emerson's principle of "correspondence." Stephen E. Whicher, *Freedom and Fate* (1953), is also valuable; it is called an "inner life" of Emerson and concentrates on the 1830s. The only treatment of Emerson's mind and art as they relate to the transcendentalist movement is Francis O. Matthiessen's superb *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941).

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**Gale Document Number:** GALEK1631002034
Transcendentalism was a religious and philosophical movement that was developed during the late 1820s and 1830s[1] in the Eastern region of the United States as a protest against the general state of culture and society, and in particular, the state of intellectualism at Harvard University and the doctrine of the Unitarian church taught at Harvard Divinity School. Among the transcendentalists' core beliefs was the inherent goodness of both people and nature.

Transcendentalists believed that society and its institutions—particularly organized religion and political parties—ultimately corrupted the purity of the individual. They had faith that people are at their best when truly "self-reliant" and independent. It is only from such real individuals that true community could be formed.

History

Origins

Transcendentalism first arose among New England congregationalists,[2] who differed from orthodox Calvinism on two issues.[2] They rejected predestination, and they emphasized the unity instead of the trinity of God.[2] Following the skepticism of David Hume, the transcendentalists took the stance that empirical proofs of religion were not possible.[2]

Transcendentalism developed as a reaction against 18th century rationalism, John Locke's philosophy of Sensualism, and the predestinationism of New England Calvinism. It is fundamentally composed of a variety of diverse sources, including Hindu texts like the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita,[3] various religions, and German idealism. [4]

Emerson's Nature

The publication of Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1836 essay Nature is usually considered the watershed moment at which transcendentalism became a major cultural movement. Emerson wrote in his 1837 speech "The American Scholar": "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." Emerson closed the essay by calling for a revolution in human consciousness to emerge from the brand new idealist philosophy:
So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes. It shall answer the endless inquiry of the intellect, — What is truth? and of the affections, — What is good? by yielding itself passive to the educated Will. ...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.

The Transcendental Club

In the same year, transcendentalism became a coherent movement with the founding of the Transcendental Club in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on September 8, 1836, by prominent New England intellectuals including George Putnam (1807–78; the Unitarian minister in Roxbury),[5] Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Frederick Henry Hedge. From 1840, the group published frequently in their journal *The Dial*, along with other venues.

Second wave of transcendentalists

By the late 1840s, Emerson believed the movement was dying out, and even more so after the death of Margaret Fuller in 1850. "All that can be said", Emerson wrote, "is that she represents an interesting hour and group in American cultivation".[6] There was, however, a second wave of transcendentalists, including Moncure Conway, Octavius Brooks Frothingham, Samuel Longfellow and Franklin Benjamin Sanborn.[7] Notably, the transgression of the spirit, most often evoked by the poet's prosaic voice, is said to endow in the reader a sense of purposefulness. This is the underlying theme in the majority of transcendentalist essays and papers—all of which are centered on subjects which assert a love for individual expression.[8]

Beliefs

Transcendentalists were strong believers in the power of the individual and divine messages. Their beliefs are closely linked with those of the Romantics.

Transcendental knowledge

The transcendentalists desired to ground their religion and philosophy in transcendental principles: principles not based on, or falsifiable by, physical experience, but deriving from the inner spiritual or mental essence of the human.[citation needed]
It was rooted in English and German Romanticism, the Biblical criticism of Herder and Schleiermacher, and the skepticism of Hume,[2] and the transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant (and of German Idealism more generally), interpreting Kant's a priori categories as a priori knowledge. The transcendentalists were largely unacquainted with German philosophy in the original, and relied primarily on the writings of Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Victor Cousin, Germaine de Staël, and other English and French commentators for their knowledge of it.

In contrast, they were intimately familiar with the English Romantics, and the transcendental movement may be partially described as a slightly later American outgrowth of Romanticism. Another major influence was the mystical spiritualism of Emanuel Swedenborg.

**Individualism**

Transcendentalists believed that society and its institutions—particularly organized religion and political parties—ultimately corrupted the purity of the individual. They had faith that people are at their best when truly "self-reliant" and independent. It is only from such real individuals that true community could be formed.

**Asian religions**

Transcendentalism has been influenced by Asian religions.[9][3][note 1] Thoreau in *Walden* spoke of the Transcendentalists' debt to Indian religions directly:

In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma, and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water-jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.[10]

**Idealism**
The transcendentalists varied in their interpretations of the practical aims of will. Some among the group linked it with utopian social change; Brownson connected it with early socialism, while others considered it an exclusively individualist and idealist project. Emerson believed the latter. In his 1842 lecture "The Transcendentalist", Emerson suggested that the goal of a purely transcendental outlook on life was impossible to attain in practice:

You will see by this sketch that there is no such thing as a transcendental party; that there is no pure transcendentalist; that we know of no one but prophets and heralds of such a philosophy; that all who by strong bias of nature have leaned to the spiritual side in doctrine, have stopped short of their goal. We have had many harbingers and forerunners; but of a purely spiritual life, history has afforded no example. I mean, we have yet no man who has leaned entirely on his character, and eaten angels' food; who, trusting to his sentiments, found life made of miracles; who, working for universal aims, found himself fed, he knew not how; clothed, sheltered, and weaponed, he knew not how, and yet it was done by his own hands. ...Shall we say, then, that transcendentalism is the Saturnalia or excess of Faith; the presentiment of a faith proper to man in his integrity, excessive only when his imperfect obedience hinders the satisfaction of his wish.

**Influence on other movements**

*Further information: History of New Thought*

Transcendentalism was in many aspects the first notable American intellectual movement. It certainly was the first to inspire succeeding generations of American intellectuals, as well as a number of literary monuments.[11]

The movement directly influenced the growing movement of "Mental Sciences" of the mid-19th century, which would later become known as the New Thought movement. New Thought considers Emerson its intellectual father.[12] Emma Curtis Hopkins "the teacher of teachers", Ernest Holmes, founder of Religious Science, the Fillmores, founders of Unity, and Malinda Cramer and Nona L. Brooks, the founders of Divine Science, were all greatly influenced by Transcendentalism.[13]
In the 19th century, under the influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson (who had been a Unitarian minister)[14] and other transcendentalists, Unitarianism began its long journey from liberal Protestantism to its present more pluralist form. [citation needed]

Transcendentalism also influenced Hinduism. Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), the founder of the Brahma Samaj, rejected Hindu mythology, but also the Christian trinity. [15] He found Unitarianism came closest to true Christianity,[15] and had a strong sympathy for the Unitarians,[16] who were closely connected to the Transcendentalists. [9] Ram Mohan Roy founded a missionary committee in Calcutta, and in 1828 asked for support for missionary activities from the American Unitarians. [17] By 1829, Roy had abandoned the Unitarian Committee, [18] but after Roy's death, the Brahma Samaj kept close ties to the Unitarian Church, [19] who strived towards a rational faith, social reform, and the joining of these two in a renewed religion. [16] Its theology was called "neo-Vedanta" by Christian commentators, [20][21] and has been highly influential in the modern popular understanding of Hinduism, [22] but also of modern western spirituality, which re-imported the Unitarian influences in the disguise of the seemingly age-old Neo-Vedanta. [22][23][24]

Major figures

The major figures in the movement were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Margaret Fuller and Amos Bronson Alcott. Other prominent transcendentalists included Louisa May Alcott, Charles Timothy Brooks, Orestes Brownson, William Ellery Channing, William Henry Channing, James Freeman Clarke, Christopher Pearse Cranch, Walt Whitman, John Sullivan Dwight, Convers Francis, William Henry Furness, Frederic Henry Hedge, Sylvester Judd, Theodore Parker, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, George Ripley, Thomas Treadwell Stone, Emily Dickinson, and Jones Very. [25]
Criticism

Early in the movement's history, the term "Transcendentalists" was used as a pejorative term by critics, who were suggesting their position was beyond sanity and reason.[26]

Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a novel, *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), satirizing the movement, and based it on his experiences at Brook Farm, a short-lived utopian community founded on transcendental principles.[27] Edgar Allan Poe wrote a story, "Never Bet the Devil Your Head", in which he embedded elements of deep dislike for transcendentalism, calling its followers "Frogpondians" after the pond on Boston Common.[28] The narrator ridiculed their writings by calling them "metaphor-run" lapsing into "mysticism for mysticism's sake".[29] and called it a "disease." The story specifically mentions the movement and its flagship journal *The Dial*, though Poe denied that he had any specific targets.[30]

In Poe's essay "The Philosophy of Composition" he offers criticism denouncing "the excess of the suggested meaning... which turns into prose (and that of the very flattest kind) the so-called poetry of the so-called transcendentalists."[31]
Lidian Jackson Emerson

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Lidian Jackson Emerson (September 20, 1802 – November 13, 1892) was the second wife of American essayist, lecturer, poet and leader of the nineteenth century Transcendentalism movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and mother of his four children. An intellectual, she was involved in many social issues of her day, advocating for the abolition of slavery, the rights of women and of Native Americans and the welfare of animals, and campaigned for her famous husband to take a public stand on the causes in which she believed.[1]

Biography

Early life

The fifth child of Charles and Lucy Cotton Jackson, Lydia Jackson was raised in austerity; by the time she was orphaned at sixteen, two of her siblings had also died, and Lydia was sent to live with relatives.[2] At the age of nineteen she developed scarlet fever, which was judged the source of her lifelong poor-health. Her head was said to be "hot ever after", and chronic digestive problems, with neurologic pain in the gastric and epigastric regions, discouraged her from eating and she became quite thin. She also dosed herself with calomel-- a commonly-used preparation containing mercury, now known to damage health.[3] The terror of her childhood would haunt Lydia Jackson all her life.[4]

Marriage

In 1834, Lydia Jackson heard Ralph Waldo Emerson give a lecture in her town of Plymouth, Massachusetts and was "so lifted to higher thoughts" that she had to hurry home before those thoughts could be tainted with everyday things. She attended another lecture and a social gathering afterward, where she was able to speak with Mr. Emerson. Although by nature a practical woman, she was inclined toward belief in omens and experienced two pre-cognitive episodes, in which she saw herself married to Emerson although they had met only once. A letter from Emerson containing a marriage proposal arrived soon after Lydia's vision of his face, looking into her eyes. Although content, at age thirty-two, with the life of a spinster-aunt who tended a garden and kept chickens, Lydia Jackson accepted Ralph Waldo Emerson's proposal. [5]

The couple were married on September 14, 1835, in the parlor of the Jackson family home overlooking Plymouth Harbor. The house, known as the Edward Winslow House, is now the headquarters of The Mayflower Society.

Newlyweds Lydia and Ralph Waldo Emerson settled immediately in Concord, in a large white house they named "Bush". It was here Lydia Emerson would play hostess to a continual stream of dinner and overnight guests throughout the years of her marriage.[6]

Emerson immediately began calling his wife "Lidian" rather than Lydia, possibly to avoid her name being pronounced "Lidiar" as would be common in New England.[7] In his book, Emerson Among the Eccentrics, Carlos Baker suggests the possibility Emerson made the change because "something in his quiet association with her recalled to his memory Milton's lines from L’Allegro:

And ever, against eating cares,
Lap me in soft Lydian airs,

Married to immortal verse
Such as the meeting soul may pierce..."[8]

On the other hand, Lidian always referred to her husband as "Mr. Emerson", reflecting "New England reserve" rather than lack of affection.[9] Lydia Jackson's name is "Lidian" on her tombstone in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.
Motherhood

Lidian's frequent bouts of illness and chronic fatigue were made worse during pregnancy, when it was difficult for her to take proper nourishment due to gastric upsets. Nevertheless, the Emersons had four children. Waldo, born October 30, 1836, would succumb to scarlet fever at age five--a loss from which Lidian Emerson would never heal.\(^{[10]}\) Eldest daughter, Ellen, would be named for the first wife of Ralph Waldo Emerson at Lidian's suggestion. Ellen Tucker Emerson, born February 24, 1839, would remain unmarried and serve to be a great help to her father in his work. She would write a biography of her mother and live to be sixty-nine. Edith Emerson, born November 22, 1841, would marry William, the son of John Murray Forbes, bear him eight children, and live to be eighty-seven. Edward Waldo Emerson, born July 10, 1844, would become a medical doctor and, upon his death at eighty-five, outlive all but one of his seven children. The Emerson family is at rest in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Concord on Author's Ridge.

Friendships

A friendship developed between Lidian Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who roomed with the Emersons, assisting with household maintainance and guiding the Emerson children. When Emerson went abroad in 1847, Thoreau wrote him that "Lidian and I make very good housekeepers. She is a very dear sister to me."\(^{[11]}\)

"The little garden which was being planted with fruit-trees and vegetables, with Mrs. Emerson's tulips and roses from Plymouth at the upper end, needed more care and much more skill to plant and cultivate than the owner had; who, moreover, could only spare a few morning hours to the work. So Thoreau took it in charge for his friend. He dealt also with the chickens, defeating their raids on the garden by asking Mrs. Emerson to make some shoes of thin morocco to stop their scratching."\(^{[11]}\)

Beliefs
In his own autobiography, Franklin Benjamin Sanborn describes Emerson's aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, greeting the new Mrs. Emerson with, "You know, dear, that we think you are among us, but not of us."[12] Years later, Ellen Emerson would explain that her mother always felt her home to be Plymouth; Lidian Jackson Emerson never fully engaged in the life of Concord, and never fully shared her husband's philosophy, which came into conflict with the strict orthodoxy of an upbringing into which the circumstances of her life would cause her to retreat.[13] Sanborn would opine that "Mrs. Emerson held a position in religion midway between the gloomy, fading Calvinism of Mary Emerson, and the intuitive, ideal Theism of her nephew."[14]

Death

In mid-November, 1892, Ellen Emerson reported that her mother was breathing heavily, as though she had a cold.

"Before we went to bed Miss Leavitt[15] was seriously alarmed. I asked Mother if I should read to her. She asked what. I said father's letters to Mr. Carlyle, and she said, By all means. I read and she slept. At about seven I tried to give her some hot milk from the sprout-cup. She said, I can't. The rattling in her throat stopped, she opened her eyes, I saw she was dying for they were dead. At 7:35 I think she breathed her last. I sent for Miss Leavitt, who smoothed her hair. Edward was a wise and skillful hand, and a great comfort."[16]

Lidian Emerson had outlived her husband by more than ten years, and was laid to rest beside him in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.

Significance

Near the end of his own life, Frank Sanborn described Mrs. Emerson as "a stately, devoted, independent person", with "the air... of a lady abbess, relieved of the care of her cloister, and given up to her garden, her reforms, and her unceasing hospitalities."[17]

See also

- Ralph Waldo Emerson
- Ralph Waldo Emerson House

References


15. ^ Alice Leavitt, sister-in-law of F.B. Sanborn, was hired as Lidian Emerson's caregiver.


Categories: 1802 births | 1892 deaths

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Reading Group Gold

Mr. Emerson's Wife

By Amy Belding Brown

St. Martin's Griffin
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May, 2006

About the Book

In this novel about Ralph Waldo Emerson's wife, Lidian, Amy Belding Brown examines the emotional landscape of love and marriage. Living in the shadow of one of the most famous men of her time, Lidian becomes deeply disappointed by marriage, but consigned to public silence by social conventions and concern for her family's reputation. Drawn to the erotic energy and intellect of close family friend Henry David Thoreau, she struggles to negotiate the confusing territory between love and friendship while maintaining her moral authority and inner strength. In the course of the book, she deals with overwhelming social demands, faces devastating personal loss, and discovers the deepest meaning of love. Lidian eventually encounters the truth of her own character and learns that even our faults can lead us to independence.

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. What is the significance of the fact that Lidian always addresses her husband as "Mr. Emerson?" When and why does she finally address him as "Waldo?"

2. In their first encounter, Lidian and Mr. Emerson discuss their views of marriage. Lidian asserts that a "marriage of opposites" is a good thing because it perfects an individual by balancing strengths and weaknesses. In what ways do you think Lidian and Mr. Emerson balance each other? Do you think Lidian's marriage proved or disproved her theory?

3. The novel is in Lidian's voice and filtered through her view of things. How do you think Lidian contributes, directly and indirectly, to the strains in her marriage? What was she looking for in her marriage? Was marriage itself important to Lidian — or only marriage to Emerson?

4. How did Lidian's experiences with her parents shape her later outlook and decisions?

5. What role does guilt play in this novel? What actions does Lidian take that she regrets? What does she do to find forgiveness? Does she ever forgive herself for her imperfections? Does forgiveness in her life and her world have any meanings no longer relevant today?

6. In what ways does death overshadow the Emersons' marriage? Is marriage a symbol of life or death in this novel?

7. How do the Emersons succeed in achieving their dream of making their home a gathering place for philosophers? In what ways do they fail? What does this dream cost them?

8. The "double" motif of the novel—two baptisms, two names, two loves—points to Lidian's deep inner conflicts. How does her religious faith complicate those conflicts? How does it help her to resolve those conflicts?

9. In Chapter 20, Lidian reflects on how strange it is that "the love of another man was the very glue that bound me to my husband." How did Lidian's relationship with Henry bind her to Mr. Emerson?

10. What do Henry's letters represent for Lidian, and how does her burning of them make her free?

11. Lidian lives in the shadow of Ellen Tucker throughout her married life. In the course of the book, she moves from jealousy to resigned acceptance of her husband's undying love for his first wife. In chapter 28, after reading Ellen's letters, Lidian states that she has "fallen in love" with Ellen. What does she mean by this? What in Lidian's character makes this possible?
12. What are some of the losses that Lidia suffers, both human and psychological? How do those losses impact her relationship with her husband? How does she try to recover from some of these losses, or doesn’t she?

13. In what ways does Lidia retain her moral authority throughout the novel, in spite of her transgressions?