

ENGL 3330: Transcendentalism and Its Discontents

A 19th century American literary and philosophical movement spearheaded by Ralph Waldo Emerson, transcendentalism was in part a reaction to the Puritans' Calvinist beliefs in the total depravity of humankind and the existential restrictions of the religious customs of the time. A philosophy that emphasized the inherent goodness of all people and of existence itself, writers like Emerson, Thoreau, and others preached the importance of self-reliance and subjective truths in the face of what they saw as corrupted societal and religious institutions. Not everyone, however, agreed with the transcendentalists' sunny take on human goodness. Most notably, authors Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville insisted in their fictions upon a far darker underbelly to human nature, and indeed, to nature itself.

In this course, we will read the foundational texts and authors of American transcendentalism. Having explored the movement and its place in 19th century America, we will place their arguments in debate with the anti-transcendentalist reaction in American fiction. Reading Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* and Melville's *The Confidence Man*, as well as selected short fictions, we will ultimately explore how this 19th century intellectual debate has shaped and continues to shape what it means to be an American today.