

Key Transcendentalist Ideas and Figures



Ralph Waldo Emerson, a theologian, writer and abolitionist, was a leader among this new generation. He wanted to honor intuition, connection with the world of nature, and each individual's potential for direct experience of the divine.

The Transcendentalists wanted to move beyond and **TRANSCEND** various boundaries of their time, including:

- **Transcend** social norms through non-conformity, self-reliance, and emphasis on individuality.
- **Transcend** historical religion, especially Christianity, to include Hinduism, Buddhism, and Wisdom traditions of the world that point to Oneness and spiritual unity of all beings.
- **Transcend** organized, institutional religion (i.e. church) and connect with God directly.
- **Transcend** the narrow emphasis of rationalism and materialism of the time, which taught that only what the physical senses perceive and the mind can reason is real. Rather, there is a spiritual intuition, an “inner light” in every person that guides. The Divine presence is inherent in both humanity and nature and can best be sensed through intuition rather than through reason.

- **Transcend** an increasingly industrialized society that alienates us from our own souls and foundations best found in Nature. The natural world reveals the “face of God.”
- **Transcend** social barriers and find liberation in women’s rights, slavery abolition, education reform, labor reform, and more.

Other members of the Transcendentalist Club

Margaret Fuller was America’s first feminist theorist, author of “Woman in the Nineteenth Century” and editor of the Transcendentalist journal *The Dial*. She challenged gender norms personally and professionally, defining herself in bi-gendered terms and asserting that women and men express both masculine and feminine traits. She advocated for prison reform and the emancipation of enslaved people. She also pushed back on Emerson’s emphasis on individuality and for a more collectivist, community-oriented feminism.

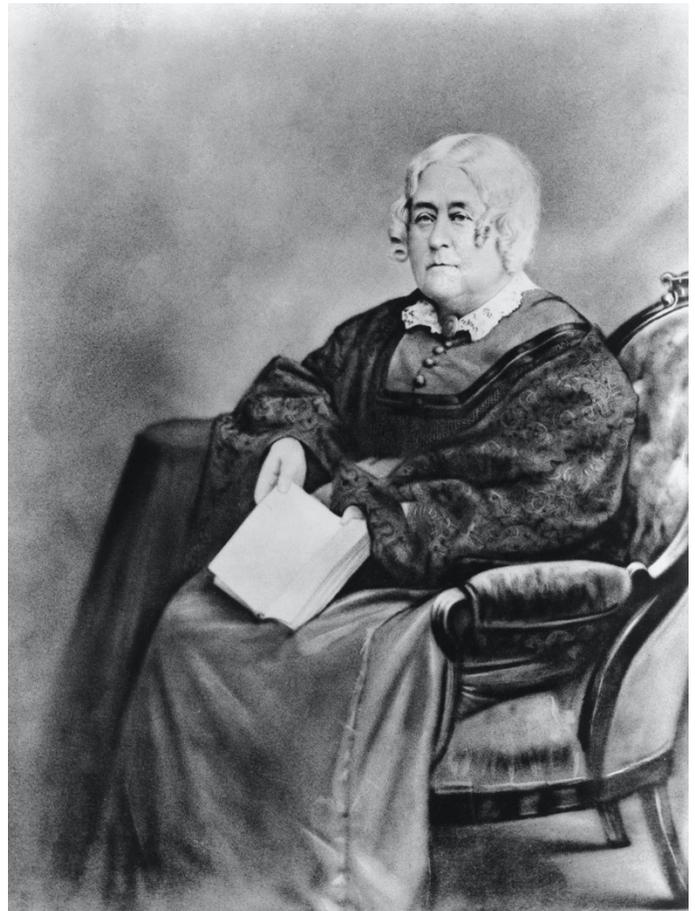




Henry David Thoreau authored “Walden” and “Civil Disobedience,” an essay that later influenced Mahatma Gandhi and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He believed in direct experience of the sacred through nature and was a committed abolitionist.

[For example, he fought against the Fugitive Slave Law which required that enslaved people, even those in free states, must be returned to their owners. The federal government was responsible for finding, returning, and trying escaped enslaved people.]

Elizabeth Palmer Peabody was America’s first woman book publisher. Among many texts, she published Henry David Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” and the antislavery book *Emancipation*, written by her mentor, William Ellery Channing. Her bookstore became a meeting place for women around the country to learn and share conversation with figures like Margaret Fuller. She spent over a decade teaching, writing and promoting public education. In Boston in 1860, she opened the nation’s first formal kindergarten.





Louisa May Alcott authored “Little Women,” which is still the most famous American novel about women’s lives. In Concord, MA, she was the first woman to register to vote and among the first group of women to vote. She worked as a Civil War nurse and advocated to abolish slavery. She supported her family financially and never married, which was rare in her day.

Bronson Alcott (Louisa’s father) introduced art, music, nature study, field trips, and physical education into his school. He actually encouraged children to ask questions by teaching through dialogue and example—this was considered odd at the time! When he admitted a black girl into his school, all the other white families left and he had to shut the school down. He continued to advocate for racially integrated schools, a hundred years before schools would be integrated.

