8.50 Identify common themes in American art and literature, including transcendentalism and individualism by analyzing essays and stories by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Louisa May Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. (C)

Last of the Mohicans by James Fenimore Cooper

Cooper wrote of American heroes instead of subject matter from Europe.
Prior to the 1800s, most American authors had based their writing on European styles and topics. Even American painters and artists who had studied in Europe, based their art work on European approaches and ideas.

By the mid-1800s, energy and optimism began to work its way into the writing of the era. Most subjects were "American" with American heroes and themes. Washington Irving wrote two popular stories based on his Dutch experiences in New York. His two stories - "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "The Headless Horseman" brought information about the events of the time period from a totally American point of view. James Fenimore Cooper wrote of his character - Natty Bumppo and his movement westward. Cooper’s novels *The Deer Slayer* and *Last of the Mohicans* told of adventure that combined nature and historical events.

**Transcendentalism, An American Philosophy**

*(Picture Above: Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* introduced the “free verse” style of poetry, reflecting the individualistic tone of transcendentalism. This picture of Whitman with a butterfly appeared in the 1889 edition.)*
Transcendentalism is a very formal word that describes a very simple idea. People, men and women equally, have knowledge about themselves and the world around them that "transcends" or goes beyond what they can see, hear, taste, touch or feel.

This knowledge comes through intuition and imagination not through logic or the senses. People can trust themselves to be their own authority on what is right. A Transcendentalist is a person who accepts these ideas not as religious beliefs but as a way of understanding life relationships.

The individuals most closely associated with this new way of thinking were connected loosely through a group known as The Transcendental Club, which met in the Boston home of George Ripley. Their chief publication was a periodical called "The Dial," edited by Margaret Fuller, a political radical and feminist whose book "Women of the Nineteenth Century" was among the most famous of its time. The club had many extraordinary thinkers, but accorded the leadership position to Ralph Waldo Emerson.

( Pictured Above: Margaret Fuller played a large part in both the women's and Transcendentalist movements. She helped plan the community at Brook Farm, as well as editing The Dial, and writing the feminist treatise, Woman in the Nineteenth Century.)

Emerson was a Harvard-educated essayist and lecturer and is recognized as our first truly "American" thinker. In his most famous essay, "THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR," he urged Americans to stop looking to Europe for inspiration and imitation and be themselves. He believed that people were naturally good and that everyone’s potential was limitless. He inspired his colleagues to look into themselves, into nature, into art, and through work for answers to life’s most perplexing questions. His intellectual contributions to the philosophy of transcendentalism inspired a uniquely American idealism and spirit of reform.

“The theory of books is noble. The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again.

It came into him, life; it went out from him, truth.

It came to him, short-lived actions; it went out from him, immortal thoughts.

It came to him, business; it went from him, poetry.

It was dead fact; now, it is quick thought.

It can stand, and it can go.

It now endures, it now flies, it now inspires

Precisely in proportion to the depth of mind from which it issued, so high does it soar, so long does it sing.”

-Excerpt from The American Scholar , Ralph Waldo Emerson

The Transcendental Club was associated with colorful members between 1836 and 1860. Among these were literary figures Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Walt Whitman. But the most interesting character by far was Henry David Thoreau, who tried to put transcendentalism into practice. A great admirer of Emerson, Thoreau nevertheless was his own man — described variously as strange, gentle, fanatic, selfish, a dreamer, a stubborn individualist. For two years Thoreau carried out the most famous experiment in self-reliance when he went to Walden Pond, built a hut, and tried to live self-sufficiently without the trappings or interference of society. Later, when he wrote about the simplicity and unity of all things in nature, his faith in humanity, and his sturdy individualism, Thoreau reminded everyone that life is wasted pursuing wealth and following social customs. Nature can show that "all good things are wild and free."
Excerpt from "Walden"

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to "glorify God and enjoy him forever."

"Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men; like pygmies we fight with cranes; it is error upon error, and clout upon clout, and our best virtue as for its occasion a superfluous and evitable wretchedness. Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail. In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live, if he would not founder and go to the bottom and not make his port at all, by dead reckoning, and he must be a great calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify."

– from Walden (1854), by Henry David Thoreau

Transcendentalists - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVFc_D-VRQw

As a group, the transcendentalists led the celebration of the American experiment as one of individualism and self-reliance. They took progressive stands on women’s rights, abolition, reform, and education. They criticized government, organized religion, laws, social institutions, and creeping industrialization. They created an American "state of mind" in which imagination was better than reason, creativity was better than theory, and action was better than contemplation. And they had faith that all would be well because humans could transcend limits and reach astonishing heights.

Ralph Waldo Emerson
Ralph Waldo Emerson (May 25, 1803 – April 27, 1882) was an American essayist, lecturer, and poet, who led the Transcendentalist movement of the mid-19th century. He was seen as a champion of individualism and a prescient critic of the countervailing pressures of society, and he disseminated his thoughts through dozens of published essays and more than 1,500 public lectures across the United States.

Emerson gradually moved away from the religious and social beliefs of his contemporaries, formulating and expressing the philosophy of Transcendentalism in his 1836 essay, *Nature*. Following this ground-breaking work, he gave a speech entitled "The American Scholar " in 1837, which Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. considered to be America’s "Intellectual Declaration of Independence".

Emerson wrote most of his important essays as lectures first, then revised them for print. His first two collections of essays – *Essays: First Series* and *Essays: Second Series*, published respectively in 1841 and 1844 – represent the core of his thinking, and include such well-known essays as *Self-Reliance*, *The Over-Soul*, *Circles*, *The Poet* and *Experience*. Together with *Nature*, these essays made the decade from the mid-1830s to the mid-1840s Emerson’s most fertile period.

Emerson wrote on a number of subjects, never espousing fixed philosophical tenets, but developing certain ideas such as individuality, freedom, the ability for humankind to realize almost anything, and the relationship between the soul and the surrounding world. Emerson’s "nature" was more philosophical than naturalistic: "Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul." Emerson is one of several figures who "took a more pantheist or pandeist approach by rejecting views of God as separate from the world."

He remains among the linchpins of the American romantic movement, and his work has greatly influenced the thinkers, writers and poets that have followed him. When asked to sum up his work, he said his central doctrine was "the infinitude of the private man." Emerson is also well known as a mentor and friend of fellow Transcendentalist...
Henry David Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau (July 12, 1817 – May 6, 1862) was an American author, poet, philosopher, abolitionist, naturalist, tax resister, development critic, surveyor, and historian. A leading transcendentalist, Thoreau is best known for his book *Walden*, a reflection upon simple living in natural surroundings, and his essay *Resistance to Civil Government* (also known as *Civil Disobedience*), an argument for disobedience to an unjust state.

Thoreau’s books, articles, essays, journals, and poetry total over 20 volumes. Among his lasting contributions are his writings on natural history and philosophy, where he anticipated the methods and findings of ecology and environmental history, two sources of modern-day environmentalism. His literary style interweaves close natural observation, personal experience, pointed rhetoric, symbolic meanings, and historical lore, while displaying a poetic sensibility, philosophical austerity, and "Yankee" love of practical detail. He was also deeply interested in the idea of survival in the face of hostile elements, historical change, and natural decay; at the same time he advocated abandoning waste and illusion in order to discover life’s true essential needs.

He was a lifelong abolitionist, delivering lectures that attacked the Fugitive Slave Law while praising the writings of Wendell Phillips and defending abolitionist John Brown. Thoreau’s philosophy of civil disobedience later influenced the political thoughts and actions of such notable figures as Leo Tolstoy, Mohandas Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Thoreau is sometimes cited as an anarchist. Though *Civil Disobedience* seems to call for improving rather than abolishing government — "I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government" — the direction of this improvement points toward anarchism: "That government is best which governs not at all; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have." Richard Drinnon partly blames Thoreau for the ambiguity, noting that Thoreau’s "sly satire, his liking for wide margins for his writing, and his fondness for paradox provided ammunition for widely divergent interpretations of 'Civil Disobedience.'"

*Read about the life and works of Henry David Thoreau from [www.biography.com](http://www.biography.com/people/henry-david-thoreau-9506784#!)*
The Walden Woods Project

https://www.walden.org/Thoreau

Louisa May Alcott

FIGURE 1.8
IMAGE NOT AVAILABLE
Transcendentalism in *Little Women*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mrHU1JfngVk

**Louisa May Alcott:** November 29, 1832 – March 6, 1888) was an American novelist best known as author of the novel *Little Women* and its sequels *Little Men* and *Jo’s Boys*. Raised by her transcendentalist parents, Abigail May and Amos Bronson Alcott in New England, she grew up among many of the well-known intellectuals of the day such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau. Nevertheless, her family suffered severe financial difficulties and Alcott worked to help support the family from an early age. She began to receive critical success for her writing in the 1860s. Early in her career, she sometimes used the pen name A. M. Barnard and under it wrote novels for young adults.

Published in 1868, *Little Women* is set in the Alcott family home, Orchard House, in Concord, Massachusetts and is loosely based on Alcott’s childhood experiences with her three sisters. The novel was very well received and is still a popular children’s novel today. Alcott was an abolitionist and a feminist. She died in Boston on March 6, 1888.


http://www.biography.com/people/louisa-may-alcott-9179520#awesm=~oHdLQpSE2AzCNo

**Nathaniel Hawthorne**

**Nathaniel Hawthorne:**; born Nathaniel Hathorne; July 4, 1804 – May 19, 1864) was an American novelist and short story writer.

He was born in 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts, to Nathaniel Hathorne and the former Elizabeth Clarke Manning. His ancestors include John Hathorne, the only judge involved in the Salem witch trials who never repented of his actions. Nathaniel later added a “w” to make his name “Hawthorne” in order to hide this relation. He entered Bowdoin College in 1821, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in 1824, and graduated in 1825. Hawthorne published his first
work, a novel titled *Fanshawe*, in 1828; he later tried to suppress it, feeling it was not equal to the standard of his later work. He published several short stories in various periodicals, which he collected in 1837 as *Twice-Told Tales*. The next year, he became engaged to Sophia Peabody. He worked at a Custom House and joined Brook Farm, a transcendentalist community, before marrying Peabody in 1842. The couple moved to The Old Manse in Concord, Massachusetts, later moving to Salem, the Berkshires, then to The Wayside in Concord. *The Scarlet Letter* was published in 1850, followed by a succession of other novels. A political appointment took Hawthorne and family to Europe before their return to The Wayside in 1860. Hawthorne died on May 19, 1864, and was survived by his wife and their three children.

Much of Hawthorne's writing centers on New England, many works featuring moral allegories with a Puritan inspiration. His fiction works are considered part of the Romantic movement and, more specifically, Dark romanticism. His themes often center on the inherent evil and sin of humanity, and his works often have moral messages and deep psychological complexity. His published works include novels, short stories, and a biography of his friend Franklin Pierce.

Read about the life and works of Nathaniel Hawthorne from [www.biography.com](http://www.biography.com/people/nathaniel-hawthorne-9331923#awesm=--oHdM3vCDyno6s4)

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (February 27, 1807 – March 24, 1882) was an American poet and educator whose works include "Paul Revere's Ride", The Song of Hiawatha, and Evangeline. He was also the first American to translate Dante Alighieri's The Divine Comedy, and was one of the five Fireside Poets. Longfellow was born in Portland, Maine, which was then a part of Massachusetts. He studied at Bowdoin College. After spending time in Europe he became a professor at Bowdoin and, later, at Harvard College. His first major poetry collections were Voices of the Night (1839) and Ballads and Other Poems (1841). Longfellow retired from teaching in 1854, to focus on his writing, living the remainder of his life in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in a former headquarters of George Washington. His first wife Mary Potter died in 1835, after a miscarriage. His second wife Frances Appleton died in 1861, after sustaining burns when her dress caught fire. After her death, Longfellow had difficulty writing poetry for a time and focused on his translation. He died in 1882.

The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_dKJ75F3tj8

American Painters

After the 1820s, the artists began to create a uniquely American style and look with their paintings. Their goal was to paint the beauty of nature. Thomas Cole painted the beauty of nature with extreme realism. George Caleb Bingham pained the power of the pioneers and river life. George Catlin painted the dignity of the American Indians.
George Caleb Bingham

George Catlin
Popular Songs of the Mid 1800s
"Camptown Races"

Sung by Johnny Cash on Youtube.com  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=noYptXPHiAE

"Old Folks at Home" by the 2nd South Carolina String Band  on Youtube.com
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLrp0AD3_78

References

1.  . THE WALDEN WOODS PROJECT.