New England transcendentalism is the first significant literary movement in American history, notable principally for the influential works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau. The movement emerged in the 1830s as a religious challenge to New England Unitarianism. Building on the writings of the Unitarian leader William Ellery Channing, Emerson and others such as Frederic Henry Hedge, George Ripley, James Freeman Clarke, and Theodore Parker developed a theology based on interior, intuitive experience rather than the historical truth of the Bible. By 1836 transcendentalist books from several important religious thinkers began to appear, including Emerson’s *Nature*, which employed idealist philosophy and Romantic symbolism to examine human interaction with the natural world. Emerson’s Harvard addresses, “The American Scholar” (1837) and the controversial “Divinity School Address” (1838), gave transcendental ideas a wider prominence, and also generated strong resistance that added an element of experiment and danger to the movement’s reputation. In 1840 the transcendentalists founded a journal for their work, and Fuller became the *Dial*’s first editor, a position that gave her an important role in the movement and a crucial outlet for her own work in literary criticism and women’s rights.

Though it had begun as a religious movement, by the middle 1840s transcendentalism could be better described as a literary movement with growing political engagements on several fronts. Emerson proclaimed it as an era of reform and aligned the transcendentalists with those who resisted the social and political status quo. In her feminist manifesto *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), Fuller called for the removal of both legal and social barriers to women’s full potential. In 1845 Henry David Thoreau went to live in the woods by Walden Pond; his memoir of his experience, *Walden* (1854), became a founding text of modern environmental thinking. Antislavery also became a key concern for many of the transcendentalists, who condemned the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and actively resisted the execution of the law after its passage. The transcendentalists, a nineteenth-century cultural avant-garde, continue to exert cultural influence through the durability of their writings, works that shaped many aspects of American national development.

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Transcendentalism is a philosophical movement that developed in the late 1820s and 1830s in the eastern United States. It arose as a reaction to protest against the general state of intellectualism and spirituality at the time. The doctrine of the Unitarian church as taught at Harvard Divinity School was of particular interest. Transcendentalism emerged from "English and German Romanticism, the Biblical criticism of Johann Gottfried Herder and Friedrich Schleiermacher, the skepticism of David Hume.