American Literature
Transcendental Optimists ~ Part One

Ralph Waldo Emerson
He was trained as a Unitarian minister, but resigned due to disagreements about church rituals and sacraments. He lived most of his adult life in Concord, MA near the site of the Battle of Lexington & Concord. He gave lectures that articulated the tenets of Transcendentalism. He let Henry D. Thoreau use a piece of his property he had purchased along Walden Pond which led to Thoreau's famous book.

Some of Emerson's Works
* Nature
* The American Scholar
* The Divinity School Address
* Self-Reliance
* Concord Hymn
* Brahma
* Hamatreya

Louisa May Alcott
Her father, Bronson Alcott, a noted Transcendental philosopher, made her home primarily in Concord most of her life. Spent some time in Boston trying to find ways to support her family and pay off the family debt. Her definition of philosophy: "My definition is of a man up in a balloon, with his family and friends pulling the ropes which confine him to earth and trying to haul him down."

Some of Alcott's Works
* Hospital Sketches
* Little Women

Characteristics of Transcendentalism
1. Transcendentalism is a form of philosophical idealism and a counterfeit religion.
2. The transcendentalist rises above the lower impulses in life, as well as the cultural restrictions of society, and moves from the rational to a spiritual realm.
3. God - or the Life Force - in the universe can be found everywhere, thus there is no need for churches or holy places.
4. God can be found in both nature and human nature. God is not a super human being but a universal spirit in us all.
5. Every person possesses the "inner light" of God which must be nourished to sustain us.
6. Every person possesses "intuition" and this is what gives us our understanding of right and wrong.
7. Culture and society tend to corrupt our intuition, establishing other determiners for morality and truth - such as the church, the government, and peer groups - that deny us our own truths. Instead we must listen to our inner selves to hear our own truths, and then we must courageously live according to what we know is true even when it is hard. In fact, the wisest sages of the past were all misunderstood souls, and so we too, when living closely to our own sense of truth, may live very differently than the church, government, or peer group would have us live.
8. Thinking helps us to actualize the authority of our intuition. Thus, we feel with our inner intuition what's right and wrong; then we know what's right/wrong.
9. Learning can also aid intuition and connect us to nature, resulting in the drive for learning new ideas and skills.
10. However, the past, in terms of learning and knowledge, should not limit or define who we are today. The material world is influx; the spiritual realm manifests itself in different ways over time. Hence, emphasis on the here and now.
11. We should live close to nature, for it is our greatest teacher. Nature holds the truths of life. Nature is symbolic of the divine, and understanding its "language" can bring us closer to God. Poets know this, and they write in the language of nature, helping us to connect our lives to the spiritual realm. They replace the priests and ministers of the church.
12. Individualism lies at the heart of Transcendentalism. Every individual needs to be self-reliant and thus not depend upon others if he or she is to be free and to live life fully. Self-empowerment is attained by defying the authority of "empty" conventions and senseless rules in society.
13. The Bible was written for people in the past and may offer some transcending lessons. But it is not the word of God. or the ultimate authority on how to live your life.
14. Jesus had God in him too, like all of us, but he was not God. In many ways, though, he taught valuable lessons and lived a transcendent life, which should be studied. The miracles of the Bible are doubted in terms of specialness; the universe around us every day is full of the miracles of nature.
15. Evil (dark) is the absence of good (light), but good is more powerful. The law of compensation means that good will always arise from evil.