

Transcendentalism & Romanticism (Similarities and Differences)

“The literary period of American Romanticism is often dated as starting around 1820 with the publication of Washington Irving’s *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon* and terminating with the American Civil War. Like earlier periods, this period’s assumptions are rooted in its views of human nature and truth. For the Romantics, human nature was neither born bad nor blank; it was born good, though it could be swayed from its essential nature by the pernicious effects of excessive rationalism or hidebound social mores. A period’s stance on human nature also affects its beliefs about the best ways to access truth. If human nature is initially corrupt, the sources of truth must be outside of it; if human nature is neither good nor bad but is accompanied by the ability to discern the workings of the world around it, then truth comes from the interaction of human ability and outside sources. For the Romantics, the essential goodness of human nature meant that the sources of truth could be discerned from within, particularly through imagination, feelings, and intuition.

As the reputation of human nature rose, so did the belief in the primacy of the individual over the community. While seventeenth century American literature most frequently warned readers to suppress self-interest in favor of the common good and eighteenth century literature presented the two as working in tandem, American Romantic literature valorized the drama of an individual striving against a repressive society. In addition, Romanticism emphasized idealism over realism. For them, literature’s purpose was not to represent the common and probable experiences of life or to teach improving lessons. Instead, literature’s role was to flesh out otherwise abstract concepts and accurately represent human emotions, what Nathaniel Hawthorne in his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) calls “the truth of the human heart.” Finally, the Romantics felt that the essential goodness of human nature had a strong link to nature itself. Unlike earlier texts that portrayed nature as, at worst, aligned with malevolent forces and, at best, raw material existing to be used by man, Romantic texts often represented nature as beneficial and congenial to the human soul. It was a place of resort when man was in need of comfort or clarity and an antidote to the negative effects of science, reason, and tradition. The philosophies and literature of the Transcendental movement differ from Romantic qualities more in degree than in kind. American Transcendentalism was a concise moment, both in geography and time. Arising from a faction of the Unitarian denomination that felt its theology did not place enough emphasis on the role of intuition in religion, this movement is typically dated as starting in 1836 with the publication of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s manifesto *Nature* and gradually faded as an active movement at the approach of the American Civil War, with the exception of Walt Whitman. Nearly all of its proponents lived in Boston or Concord, Massachusetts.

Nonetheless, Transcendentalism had an outsized impact on American intellectual conversation and on the literature produced during the latter half of the Romantic period. Like prior Romantics, Transcendental writers also emphasized the supremacy of the individual, some to the degree that the individual was better off distancing himself physically or mentally from all

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other people, even family, to preserve the sanctity of self-reliance. Transcendentalists extended the Romantic kinship between human nature and the natural world, arguing that humanity and nature were all expressions of God (referenced under several different names like the Absolute Spirit or the Oversoul) and that nature served to guide humanity toward realization of that essential truth. Furthermore, Transcendentalists also agreed that the conduit to truth was within and located it particularly in intuition, a kind of knowledge prior to and superior to any Lockean sensory experience or reflections upon it.

Transcendentalism had an impact on American literary culture both directly and indirectly. Several of the best known American Romantics sneered at its beliefs. Poe roundly insulted several major Transcendental figures in his criticism and Melville included satiric versions of Emerson and Thoreau in his final novel *The Confidence Man* (1857). Nonetheless, even authors critical of Transcendentalism could not help but address some of its key concerns, either positively or negatively and sometimes both within the same work. In short, Transcendentalism introduced a series of pronouncements to which other writers of the period felt compelled to respond. Writers of the latter part of the Romantic period pondered questions of whether nature existed to teach us, whether we were capable of seeing past our biases to the truth, and whether it was possible or even desirable to live a life completely independent of others.

As a final note in these descriptions of Romantic and Transcendental emphases, it should be acknowledged that literary periods are constructions—lenses that help us organize an otherwise chaotic spectrum of years of literary production. Some works written during the Romantic and Transcendental periods challenge those lenses and are worthy of consideration nonetheless. Romanticism's insistence that art should not be required to teach a lesson—Hawthorne compared making it do so to sticking a pin through a butterfly—is a luxury of which not all writers could partake. Slave narratives, such as those of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, depicted common experiences of slaves, aimed to teach a lesson about the evils of slavery, and hoped to have real world results. Similarly, women's fiction—sometimes called sentimental or domestic fiction—often revealed the vulnerability of women to unscrupulous relatives and suitors and sought to question the domestic sphere to which women were confined or to compel greater respect for the work women did within it. Though these works are less familiar to modern readers, these were some of the most popular genres for nineteenth century readers and represent the vast majority of what Americans actually read during this period.” (Housatonic Community College [Libretexts])

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“Following are the main differences between Romanticism and Transcendentalism:

1. Romanticism was born in Europe while transcendentalism was inspired by Romanticism and was a creation in the United States of America.
2. Romanticism came before Transcendentalism. Romanticism saw its beginning in the late 18th century and lasted till the mid 19th century (1840) whereas Transcendentalism lasted between 1830 to 1855.
3. Romanticism was based mostly on human nature and behaviour while Transcendentalism was based mostly on inner insights and truth.
4. The style of writing in Romanticism was mostly individualistic, creative and based on emotions and feelings. The style of writing in transcendentalism was mostly about insights and deeper truths of life.
5. Romanticism did not focus on God and religion but Transcendentalism was embedded in the belief in the presence of God in all things.
6. Romanticism was created with an outlook to better human behaviour and transcendentalism was created to improve religious beliefs.
7. The significant advocates of romanticism are great writers like John Keats, Lord Byron and P. B. Shelley. The significant advocates of Transcendentalism are great writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller.
8. Transcendentalism believed only in the inner goodness of individuals. On the other hand, Romanticism embraced both the inner goodness and the inherent darkness.”

References:

Housatonic Community College [Libretexts]. “9.1: Introduction- Romanticism and Transcendentalism.” *Humanities LibreTexts*, 12 Sept. 2022, [human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/American_Literature_Survey/09%3A_Week_X_Transcendentalism/9.01%3A_Introduction-_Romanticism_and_Transcendentalis](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Housatonic_Community_College/American_Literature_Survey/09%3A_Week_X_Transcendentalism/9.01%3A_Introduction-_Romanticism_and_Transcendentalism)[m](#). Accessed 5 Dec. 2024.