

Ralph Waldo Emerson

1803-1882

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<http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/>



Biography

Waldo Emerson is truly the center of the American transcendental movement, setting out most of its ideas and values in a little book, *Nature*, published in 1836, that represented at least ten years of intense study in philosophy, religion, and literature, and in his First Series of essays.

Born in 1803 to a conservative Unitarian minister, from a long line of ministers, and a quietly devout mother, Waldo--who dropped the "Ralph" in college--was a middle son of whom relatively little was expected. His father died when he was eight, the first of many premature deaths which would shape his life--all three brothers, his first wife at 20, and his older son at 5. Perhaps the most powerful personal influence on him for years was his intellectual, eccentric, and death-obsessed Puritanical aunt, Mary Moody Emerson. Yet Emerson often confessed to an innate optimism, even occasional "silliness."

His undergraduate career at Harvard was not illustrious, and his studies at the Harvard Divinity School were truncated by vision problems, but he was ordained a minister of the Second Church in Boston, shortly before marrying Ellen Tucker in 1829. He resigned in 1832 after her death from tuberculosis, troubled by theological doctrines such as the Lord's Supper, and traveled extensively in Europe, returning to begin a career of lecturing. In 1835 he married Lydia Jackson; they lived in Concord and had four children while he settled into his life of conversations, reading and writing, and lecturing, which furnished a comfortable income.

The Emerson house was a busy one, with friends like Elizabeth Hoar, Margaret Fuller, and Henry Thoreau, staying for months to help out and talk. He, Bronson Alcott, and George Ripley decided to begin a magazine, *The Dial*, with Margaret Fuller editing, in 1840; Emerson would edit the final two years, ending in 1844. His *Essays* (first series) were published in 1841.

Meanwhile, tragedy struck with the sudden death of his five-year old son Waldo in 1842, soon after the death of John Thoreau from lockjaw, and a darker, tougher strain appears in Emerson's writing, beginning with his memorializing poem, "Threnody." But Emerson pulled himself together to give a series of lectures in New York and in 1844 he had a new volume of essays prepared. He began planning a series of lectures on great men and publication of his poems in 1846, while speaking out against the annexation of Texas and reading deeply in texts of Persian and Indic wisdom.

In 1845 he began extensive lecturing on "the uses of great men," a series that culminated with the 1850 publication of *Representative Men*; by that year he was giving as many as 80 lectures a year. Through a career of 40 years, he gave about 1500 public lectures, traveling as far as California and Canada but generally staying in Massachusetts. His audiences were captivated by his speaking style, even if they didn't always follow the subtleties of his arguments.

In 1847 Emerson travelled to England, noticing in particular the industrialization and the chasm between upper and lower classes. When he returned to Concord nine months later, he had a new approach to English culture, which he expressed in his lectures on the "Natural History of Intellect" and his 1856 book, *English Traits*.

In 1851 he began a series of lecture which would become *The Conduct of Life*, published in 1860. He was vigorous in middle age, traveling frequently, but was increasingly aware of his limits and failing energy. He had become quite famous, a major figure in the American literary landscape, a celebrity which brought both adulation and satire. He had been a profound inspiration for many writers, especially Henry Thoreau and Walt Whitman. He continued his speeches against slavery, but never with the fire of Theodore Parker. In 1857 he wrote an essay on "Memory" but ironically, in his later years, his own memory would falter, especially after his beloved house burned in 1872. He died quietly of pneumonia in 1882.

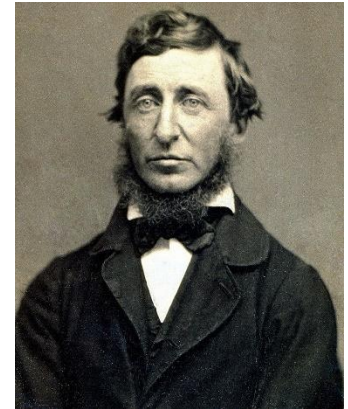


Emerson in the 1850s

Henry David Thoreau

by Richard J. Schneider

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was born and lived nearly all his life in Concord, Massachusetts, a small town about twenty miles west of Boston. He received his education at the public school in Concord and at the private Concord Academy. Proving to be a better scholar than his more fun-loving and popular elder brother John, he was sent to Harvard. He did well there and, despite having to drop out for several months for financial and health reasons, was graduated in the top half of his class in 1837.



Thoreau's graduation came at an inauspicious time. In 1837, America was experiencing an economic depression and jobs were not plentiful. Furthermore, Thoreau found himself temperamentally unsuited for three of the four usual professions open to Harvard graduates: the ministry, the law, and medicine. The fourth, teaching, was one he felt comfortable with, since both of his elder siblings, Helen and John, were already teachers. He was hired as the teacher of the Concord public school, but resigned after only two weeks because of a dispute with his superintendent over how to discipline the children. For a while he and John considered seeking their fortunes in Kentucky, but at last he fell back onto working in his father's pencil factory.

Thoreau's family participated in the "quiet desperation" of commerce and industry through the pencil factory owned and managed by his father. Thoreau family pencils, produced behind the family house on Main Street, were generally recognized as America's best pencils, largely because of Henry's research into German pencil-making techniques.

In 1838, he decided to start his own school in Concord, eventually asking John to help him. The two brothers worked well together and vacationed together during holidays. In September 1839, they spent a memorable week together on a boating trip up the Concord and Merrimack rivers to Mount Washington in New Hampshire. About the same time both brothers became romantically interested in Ellen Sewall, a frequent visitor to Concord from Cape Cod. In the fall of the next year, both brothers -- first John and then Henry -- proposed marriage to her. But because of her father's objections to the Thoreaus' liberal religious views, Ellen rejected both proposals.

When John endured a lengthy illness in 1841, the school became too much for Henry to handle alone, so he closed it. He returned to work in the pencil factory but was soon invited to work as a live-in handyman in the home of his mentor, neighbor, and friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Emerson was by then already one of the most famous American philosophers and men of letters. Since Thoreau's graduation from Harvard, he had become a protégé of his famous neighbor and an informal student of Emerson's Transcendental ideas. Transcendentalism was an American version of Romantic Idealism, a dualistic Neoplatonic view of the world divided into the material and the spiritual. For Emerson, "Mind is the only reality, of which all other natures are better or worse reflectors. Nature, literature, history, are only subjective phenomena." For the Transcendentalist, the secret of successful living was to hold oneself above material concerns as much as possible and focus on the spiritual. Thoreau must have imbibed Transcendentalism through almost every pore during his two years living with Emerson, though he would modify it to suit his own temperament by granting nature more reality than Emerson did.

During his stay with Emerson, Thoreau developed ambitions of becoming a writer and got help from Emerson in getting some poems and essays published in the Transcendental journal, *The Dial*. But life in his parents' home held problems for the budding writer. Work in the pencil factory was tedious and tiring, and, since his mother took in boarders, there was little quiet or privacy in the house. Remembering a summer visit to the retreat cabin of college friend Charles Stearns Wheeler, Thoreau developed a plan to build such a house for himself where he could find privacy to write.

In 1845, he received permission from Emerson to use a piece of land that Emerson owned on the shore of Walden Pond. He bought building supplies and a chicken coop (for the boards), and built himself a small house there, moving in on the Fourth of July. He had two main purposes in moving to the pond: to write his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, as a tribute to his late brother John; and to conduct an economic experiment to see if it were possible to live by working one day and devoting the other six to more Transcendental concerns, thus reversing the Yankee habit of working six days and resting one. His nature study and the writing of *Walden* would develop later during his stay at the pond. He began writing *Walden* in 1846 as a lecture in response to the questions of townspeople who were curious about what he was doing out at the pond, but his notes soon grew into his second book.

Thoreau stayed in the house at Walden Pond for two years, from July 1845 to September 1847. *Walden* condenses the experiences of those two years into one year for artistic unity. During these two years he also spent one night in jail, an incident which occurred in the summer of 1846 and which became the subject of his essay "Resistance to Civil Government" (later known as "Civil Disobedience"). That same year he also took a trip to Maine to see and climb Mount Katahdin, a place with a much wilder nature than he could find around Concord.

In the years after leaving Walden Pond, Thoreau published *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) and *Walden* (1854). *A Week* sold poorly, leading Thoreau to hold off publication of *Walden*, so that he could revise it extensively to avoid the problems, such as looseness of structure and a preaching tone unalleviated by humor, that had put readers off in the first book. *Walden* was a modest success: it brought Thoreau good reviews, satisfactory sales, and a small following of fans.

Thoreau returned to the Emerson home and lived there for two years, while Emerson was on a lecture tour in Europe. For much of his remaining years, he rented a room in his parents' home. He made his living by working in the pencil factory, by doing surveying, by lecturing occasionally, and by publishing essays in newspapers and journals. His income, however, was always very modest, and his main concerns were his daily afternoon walks in the Concord woods, the keeping of a private journal of his nature observations and ideas, and the writing and revision of essays for publication.

Thoreau was an ardent and outspoken abolitionist, serving as a conductor on the underground railroad to help escaped slaves make their way to Canada. He wrote strongly-worded attacks on the Fugitive Slave Law ("Slavery in Massachusetts") and on the execution of John Brown.

His trips to the Maine woods and to Cape Cod provided material for travel essays published first in journals; these were eventually collected into posthumous books. Other excursions took him to Canada and, near the end of his life, to Minnesota.

In May 1862, Thoreau died of the tuberculosis with which he had been periodically plagued since his college years. He left behind large unfinished projects, including a comprehensive record of natural phenomena around Concord, extensive notes on American Indians, and many volumes of his daily

journal jottings. At his funeral, his friend Emerson said, "The country knows not yet, or in the least part, how great a son it has lost. . . . His soul was made for the noblest society; he had in a short life exhausted the capabilities of this world; wherever there is knowledge, wherever there is virtue, wherever there is beauty, he will find a home."