

Lesson Idea

What is transcendentalism?

Use PowerPoint and video clips to introduce students to the key ideas in Transcendentalism.

1. Discuss what it means to *transcend*. It's a verb, so it's something that requires action, in this case to go beyond. In order to go beyond, there must be an awareness of the ordinary, of conformity. Transcending demands something more.
2. Provide a brief overview of Transcendentalism. Definition, overview of time period, brief mention of key names and contributions.
3. Show a series of movie clips and images and then ask students to identify key ideas as each is presented.
 - a. *Dead Poet's Society*---clip #1 Carpe Diem—"Seize the day, boys—make your lives extraordinary." Theme: Do things that matter. Make the most of the time we have and spend our time on worthwhile actions that mean something to us. Thoreau will refer to this as "living deliberately."
 - b. *Dead Poet's Society* – clip #2 This is the scene in the movie where Mr. Keating demands that his students rip out the introduction to their textbooks because it tells them how to read poetry instead of letting them think for themselves. Theme: Trust ourselves and our own opinions. Don't depend on what others have always said or done. Explore on your own, pay attention to the details, and listen to our own ideas. The transcendentalists will call this intuition. Transcendentalists emphasized the intuitive over the empirical, what our souls revealed over what our senses could prove.
 - c. *Dead Poet's Society* – clip #3 (1:03:20-1:05:45) This scene is Mr. Keating's lesson on conformity where he his students walk around the courtyard. We shouldn't just follow the crowd. We need to follow our own principles even when society does not agree. Theme: We should trust ourselves enough to act on our intuition. Individuals should live according to their principles instead of blindly following the expectations of society.
 - d. *Sony High Definition Demo Video featuring nature images and sounds* (Available on YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHoC5jr2m_M&feature=related)). After viewing about two minutes of the video, ask students about the advantages of spending time in Nature. What does nature do for us? What are the contrasts between Nature and Society? Explain that the Transcendentalists believed people needed to get away from the distractions of society. They believed in what they called the Oversoul, a divine spirit or mind that connected each individual and everything in Nature. Attending to the divine spirit in humanity and in Nature, which were manifestations of God, made it possible to understand universal laws and the individual self. The Transcendentalists thought all people were inherently good and would be so if they listened to the right influences, especially those found in Nature.
 - e. *Place pictures of these individuals on PowerPoint: Henry David Thoreau, Mahatmas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela.* Ask students about the connections among the four photos. All demonstrated a sense of social responsibility. They acted against conventional views of society and sometimes even the laws of that society to fight injustice or encourage social reform. Theme: Individual action should reflect moral principles. Only this will lead to societal reform.