Notes for Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and the Gothic Tradition

**Romanticism**

Romanticism began as a literary movement in the 18th century in Europe, though the literary tradition was imported to America and blossomed in the relative peace and prosperity of the early to mid 19th century. The hallmarks of this literary tradition possessed the following values:

- More emotional, especially the emotions of individuals
- Interested in individual psychological motivations and rebelled against the intellectual elitism and aristocratic values forwarded during the Age of Enlightenment
- Narratives became popular and reflected a shift from writing for practical to writing for purpose of art & entertainment
- Interested in Nature as place for reflection and a place of beauty
- Looked for God’s voice in Nature, which can best be explained by the function of [Aeolian Harp](#).

**Notes on Transcendentalism**

**History of the Philosophy**

- Taken from the essay “The Transcendentalist” by Immanuel Kant, a German Romantic philosopher.
- In this essay, Kant suggests that “transcendental knowledge” is gathered by sensory perception.
- Americans poets and writers took his philosophy a step further by combining Kant’s German Romanticism with Eastern mysticism and Unitarian doctrine.

**Transcendentalism as an American literary movement**

- Some of the writers and poets that called themselves Transcendentalists were: Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, and many others.
- These men and some women formed a society called the Transcendentalist Club
- They tried to extend Kant’s philosophy by suggesting that intuitive understanding of truth, not just sensory perception of truth, transcends the limits of human sense experience.
- They rebelled against formalized religion (like the Puritans), social conformity, materialism, and commercialism.
- They focused instead on the “ethics of individualism that stressed self-trust, self-reliance, and self-sufficiency.”

**Walden as an Essential Transcendental Text**

*Walden* records how Thoreau tested his distinctive and radically individualist version of Transcendental values by withdrawing completely from society and relying entirely upon Nature. He simplified his life to such an extent that he took no more than what he needed in his life and sought answers by simplifying his life and getting closer to Nature.
Gothic Architecture & the Gothic Literary Tradition

Notes on the Gothic Literary Tradition
Gothic signifies something Germanic or Medieval

In the 18th and 19th centuries, interest in these Gothic settings (often castles with hidden doors and ghosts) grew in popularity, but the absence of Medieval architecture led American writers to reimagine traditional Gothic settings or to set their stories in Europe.

Gothic Characteristics
- Brooding atmosphere of gloom and terror, typically a castle or ancient mansion. Settings are usually dark and gloomy.
- Supernatural elements are usually involved. Some sort of angel, devil, or ghost is often present.
- Events often involve violence that is melodramatically macabre, which is to say extreme, freakish violence.
- Characters are often psychologically deranged or they suffer from some sort of emotional, mental, or physical problem.
**Detailed Romantic Period Notes (Developed from American Literature: A Brief History, 1964)**

**Chief Points of difference between Calvinism and Unitarianism**

Preaching from his Unitarian pulpit in 1831, Emerson designated the Calvinistic vs. Unitarian groups as the “rigid” vs. “liberal” parties, respectively.

- **Concept of the Deity**: Calvinism emphasized God’s justice; Unitarianism stressed his benevolence; Unitarians questioned the concept of Election
- **Conception of Christ**: Calvinism mandates that Christ is literally the son of God – the second member of the trinity; Unitarians suggest that Christ is Divine in the sense that all men are divine or have and element, however small, of divinity in their nature
- **Conception of Man**: Calvinism asserted the depravity of man, his predestination, and the necessity of his salvation through the atoning death of Christ; Unitarians stressed man’s innate goodness and his spiritual freedom; moreover, they stressed the importance of Christ’s life and teachings as an example to be emulated by men already with the potential for good.
- **William Ellery Channing**, an influential early Unitarian, influenced by French romanticism and the work of Rousseau, is known to have said, “Calvinism is giving place to better views. We think the decline of Calvinism one of the most encouraging facts in our passing history.”

**Development of Transcendentalism**

**Emerson and Unitarianism**: Emerson left the Unitarian ministry in 1832 because of a growing dissatisfaction with the official role of clergymen and the formalities of the church. Emerson felt the church:

- Was good as far as it went, but did not go far enough in rehabilitate the individual.
- Developed a new doctrine called Transcendentalism

- Emerson’s 1836 publication of his essay “Nature”: This became the Transcendentalist Bible
  - Emerson became its chief interpreter
  - Transcendentalist Club formed
  - Quarterly magazines were published *The Dial*

**The Transcendental Philosophy**: Was born of idealistic philosophies of other lands and ages: Plato and NeoPlatonists, by Oriental Scriptures, by Kant and other German idealists – particularly as interpreted by Coleridge and Carlyle, English writers.

- **Defined** as “the recognition in man of the capacity of knowing truth intuitively, or of attaining knowledge transcending the reach of the senses.”
- **Characterized** as “importing German idealism into American Unitarianism”
- Unitarianism paved the way for Transcendentalism by suggesting man’s innate goodness and must trust his own perception of religious truth.

**Differences between Unitarianism and Transcendentalism**

- The process of Understanding by the Rationalism vs. Reason by way of Intuition
- **Interpret the Bible as your perception leads vs. “Make your own Bible,”** as stated by Emerson. He said, “Select and collect all the words and sentences that in all your reading have been to you like the blast of a trumpet, out of Shakespeare, Seneca, Moses, Jon, and Paul.” He would go on to say, “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.”

**Emerson vs. Thoreau**

- **Emerson** is generally thought to be a proponent of theoretical side of Transcendentalism
- **Thoreau** is generally thought to be a proponent for the actual practice of Transcendentalism, as evidenced by his most famous effort, *Walden.*
Supporters and Opponents: to Transcendental Thought and Unitarianism

- **Supporters**: Emerson (theoretically), Thoreau (practically), Longfellow (mildly), Lowell (interested, but not necessarily a disciple of either)
- **Opponents**: Hawthorne (stoutly Puritanical, satirized excessive idealism in “The Celestial Railroad”), Melville (later, Hawthorne’s friend and sympathizer)

Democracy, Industrialism, and Expansion

**Conservative vs. Liberalism**
- Whigs: Conservative men of property and influence
- Democrats: Liberal men of little or no property

**Election of Andrew Jackson by the Democrats**
- Jackson was the conqueror of the Creek Indians
- A man’s man and the popular champion
- Andrew Jackson of Tennessee vs. J. Q. Adams of New England
  - “Hick”ory vs. A Statesmen

**Contradiction in Emerson:**
- “The mass (of men) are animal, in state of pupilage, and nearer the chimpanzee”
- The Whigs have “the best men,” but the Democrats have “the best cause”

**Machine vs. Self-Reliance**
- Industrialism shaped Northern states & New England primarily
- *Emerson* was mildly skeptical of the dangers to humanity and suggested a “beneficent tendency”
- *Thoreau* was adamantly opposed to industrialization from the belief in self-reliance, not just in theory, but in practice.
- *Hawthorne* speculated on the evil outcome of mechanization: “A steam engine in a factory to be supposed to possess a malignant spirit; it catches one man’s arm and pulls it off; seizes another by the coat-tails, and almost grapples him bodily; catches a girl by the hair, and scalps her; and finally draws a man and crushes him to death.”

**Westward Expansion**
- Conservative New Englanders were inclined to deprecate Westward migration
- Migration was seen by the high-minded as a decline to a lower level
- Thoreau, on the other hand, said, “We need the tonic of the wilderness” in *Walden*.

Science and Human Progress

**Significant Advances in Scientific Philosophy**
- Sir Charles Lyell’s *Principle’s of Geology*, 1830, established the antiquity of the earth
- Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, 1859, presented evolutionary theory

**Understanding Nature vs. Experiencing Nature**
- Emerson supported scientific endeavor wholeheartedly and was well-versed in scientific writings
- Thoreau, on the other hand, was interested in Nature for its own sake. He saw dissection as sick and asserted that Nature is best observed in the world, alive and breathing
- Hawthorne was perversely at odds with scientific endeavor and suggested its excessive cultivation produced and atrophy of the soul and made its practitioners “fiendish”