

JUNIOR TUTORIAL: THE TRANSCENDENTALISTS AND THEIR LEGACY

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Course Description:

This course provides a comprehensive introduction to the lives, work, and legacy of the three premier American Transcendentalist writers: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau. Over a couple decades in the mid-19th century, these three authors—by turns friends, rivals, neighbors, and even housemates in nearby Concord, Massachusetts—created what Emerson called “a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition” and laid the foundations for American literature as we know it today. They also led the first countercultural movement in American history, advocating causes as varied as environmentalism, abolitionism, women’s rights, and the “higher law” of the individual conscience in an age of unbridled capitalism and populism. We will consider the Transcendentalists as both writers and reformers, examining their calls for a uniquely American literature and their romantic sacralization of nature as well as their deep commitment to reform and their engagement with the turbulent politics of their time. In the final weeks of the course, we will explore the Transcendentalists’ profound influence on American cultural history, ranging from their contemporaries (Frederick Douglass, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Nathaniel Hawthorne) to ours (Marilynne Robinson and Terrence Malick).

As a junior tutorial, this course is also meant to introduce you to current academic approaches to literary study and to prepare you for writing a significant critical paper of your own. Toward that end, our weekly readings will also survey a range of scholarly methods, including ecocriticism, feminist criticism, new materialism, and historicism. As befits its period-specific focus, this course will give particular weight to scholarship that focuses on literary, cultural, and intellectual history.

General Tutorial Goals: To engage in advanced literary study and prepare a 20- to 25-page paper in preparation for a senior honors thesis. We will focus on how to:

- Identify and develop a research topic
- Develop a scholarly bibliography relevant to your topic
- Engage secondary sources with one another and (above all) with your own ideas
- Write with precision, structure, and style

Course-Specific Goals:

- To articulate the philosophical, aesthetic, and political tenets of arguably the most influential movement in American literary history
- To identify differences as well as continuities between three writers commonly grouped together
- To explore current as well as classic scholarship on Transcendentalism and its influence
- To understand how classic literary texts reflect and refract the intellectual, political, and cultural history of their time—and perhaps of ours, too

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Assignments:

- *Short paper*, due Week Four: 4- to 6-page paper focusing on one of the primary texts from the first four weeks
- *Final paper prospectus*, due Week Seven: 2-page prospectus and annotated bibliography with 8-10 sources
- *Final paper draft*, due Week Ten: Full draft of the final 20- to 25-page paper
- *Final paper*, due Reading Period: 20- to 25-page critical paper, engaging with primary texts as well as secondary scholarship
- *Participation*: Thoughtful participation in each week's class. This includes two "discussion starters" (5-minute presentations in class) over the course of the term, one on a primary text and one on a secondary text. You will circulate a brief and relatively informal written reflection on the text by the evening before class and then informally present those reflections to the class, closing with some questions or topics for group discussion. The purpose of this exercise is *not* to summarize the reading but to give us your reaction to it.

Grade Breakdown:

- Final paper: 40%
- Final paper draft: 10%
- Final paper prospectus and annotated bibliography: 15%
- Short paper: 15%
- Participation: 20% (including discussion starters)

Required Texts:

The texts below should be purchased or borrowed from the library. Unless you already own another edition, please try to acquire the editions listed below. All other readings will be available on Canvas.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (Penguin)
- Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Norton ed.)
- Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (Hill and Wang)
- Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (Oxford World's Classics ed.)
- Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)
- Henry David Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (Penguin)

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE:

(*N.B.*: Readings are open to amendment and/or rearrangement. We will have one "wild-card week" in which a later week's reading can be substituted for the scheduled reading, in order to accommodate student interests. Depending on student interest, availability, and feasibility, we may also schedule a visit to Concord outside of class hours.)

Week One: Introduction and Influences

Primary Texts:

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Transcendentalist" (1842)

- William Wordsworth, “Expostulation and Reply” (1798); “The Tables Turned” (1798); “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” (1798)
- Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Frost at Midnight” (1798)

Secondary Texts:

- Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (2007) [Methodology: intellectual history; group biography]

PART ONE: NATURE’S NATION

Week Two: Declaring Independence

Primary Texts:

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (1836); “The American Scholar” (1837); Divinity School Address (1838); “History” (1841); “Self-Reliance” (1841); “Each and All” (1839); “The Rhodora” (1839); “Uriel” (1847)

Secondary Texts:

- F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941), ch. 1, “In the Optative Mood,” sections 1-4 [Methodology: literary history]
- Robert D. Richardson, Jr., “Emerson and Nature” (1999) [Methodology: biographical criticism]

Tutorial Program General Meeting #1: Welcome and Overview (time/place TBA)

Week Three: Transcendental Travelogues

Primary Texts:

- Margaret Fuller, *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* (1844), selections
- Henry David Thoreau, “Natural History of Massachusetts” (1843); “Ktaadn” (1848); *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), selections

Secondary Texts:

- Jane Bennett, *Thoreau’s Nature: Ethics, Politics, and the Wild* (1994), ch. 3, “Writing a Heteroverse”; *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), preface and ch. 1, “The Force of Things” [Methodology: new materialism; ecocriticism]

Short paper due

Week Four: Life in the Woods

Primary Texts:

- Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854), through “The Ponds” chapter

Secondary Texts:

- Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995), introduction and ch. 4, “Walden’s Environmental Projects” [Methodology: ecocriticism]
- Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (1987), ch. 6 (“A Hound, a Bay Horse, and a Turtle Dove: Obscurity in Walden”) [Methodology: poststructuralism]

First half of this week’s class: Library visit and research methods discussion

Week Five: The Preservation of the World

Primary Texts:

- Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854), through “Conclusion”; “Walking” (1862); *Journal*, selections
- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Thoreau” (1862)

Secondary Texts:

- Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964), selection from ch. 5, “Two Kingdoms of Force” [Methodology: genre criticism; cultural history]
- Laura Dassow Walls, *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science* (1995), introduction and ch. 6, “Walking the Holy Land” [Methodology: ecocriticism; history of science]

Tutorial Program General Meeting #2: Seniors Tell All: Reflections on the Junior Essay (time/place TBA)

Week Six*: Varieties of Transcendental Experience

Primary Texts:

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Over-Soul” (1841); “Circles” (1841); “Experience” (1844); “Fate” (1860); “Illusions” (1860)
- Margaret Fuller, “Recollection of Mystical Experiences” (1840)

Secondary Texts:

- Sharon Cameron, “Representing Grief: Emerson’s ‘Experience,’” *Representations* (Summer 1986) [Methodology: poststructuralism; close reading]
- Stanley Cavell, *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* (2003), ch. 10, “Emerson’s Constitutional Amending: Reading ‘Fate’” [Methodology: close reading; philosophy and literature]

*** This is the designated “wild-card week,” in which we may substitute a later week’s reading (and push this and all subsequent readings back a week) depending upon student interests.**

PART TWO: REFORM

Week Seven: In the Marketplace

Primary Texts:

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Compensation” (1841); “The Young American” (1844); “Ode, Inscribed to W.H. Channing” (1846); “Wealth” (1860)
- Henry David Thoreau, “Paradise (to be) Regained” (1843); “Life Without Principle” (1863); reconsider “Economy” chapter of *Walden*
- Frederick Douglass, “Pictures and Progress” (1861)

Secondary Texts:

- Richard F. Teichgraber III, *Sublime Thoughts/Penny Wisdom: Situating Emerson and Thoreau in the American Market* (1995), ch. 2, “‘A Yankee Diogenes’: Thoreau on the Market” [Methodology: historicism]
- Jeffrey Sklansky, *The Soul’s Economy: Market Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820-1920* (2002), ch. 2, “Transcendental Psychology in Antebellum New England: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Bushnell, and Margaret Fuller” [Methodology: intellectual history]

Prospectus and annotated bibliography due

Week Eight: The Destiny of Woman

Primary Texts:

- Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845)

Secondary Texts:

- Annette Kolodny, “Inventing a Feminist Discourse: Rhetoric and Resistance in Margaret Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*,” *New Literary History* (Spring 1994) [Methodology: feminist criticism; literary history]
- David M. Robinson, “Margaret Fuller and the Transcendental Ethos: *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*,” *PMLA* (January 1982) [Methodology: literary history]

Week Nine: Slavery and the Higher Law

Primary Texts:

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Fugitive Slave Law—Address at Concord” (1851); “John Brown—Speech at Boston” (1859); “John Brown—Speech at Salem” (1860); “The Emancipation Proclamation” (1862)
- Henry David Thoreau, “Resistance to Civil Government” (1849); “Slavery in Massachusetts” (1854); “A Plea for Captain John Brown” (1859); “The Last Days of John Brown” (1860)
- Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963)

Secondary Texts:

- Geoffrey R. Kirsch, “‘So Much a Piece of Nature’: Emerson, Webster, and the Transcendental Constitution,” *The New England Quarterly* (December 2018) [Methodology: historicism; law and literature]
- Daniel S. Malachuk, *Two Cities: The Political Thought of American Transcendentalism* (2016), introduction and selections from ch. 5, “‘So We Saunter Toward the Holy Land’: Thoreau and the City of God” [Methodology: historicism; law and literature]
- Rebecca Solnit, “The Thoreau Problem,” *Orion Magazine* (May/June 2007) [Methodology: literary essay]

PART THREE: LITERARY LEGACIES

(*N.B.*: The syllabus for the final four weeks of the course is currently focused on the Transcendentalists’ literary legacies, but depending on student interests we may alternatively consider their legacies in non-literary realms: for instance, Emerson’s philosophical influence on Friedrich Nietzsche and William James, or Thoreau’s influence on environmentalism and on civil disobedience, or Fuller’s influence on feminism.)

Week Ten: The 19th Century Novel

Primary Texts:

- Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (1852)

Secondary Texts:

- Nina Baym, “*The Blithedale Romance*: A Radical Reading,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (October 1968) [Methodology: psychoanalytic criticism; feminist criticism]

- Philip F. Gura, *Man's Better Angels: Romantic Reformers and the Coming of the Civil War*, introduction and ch. 1, "George Ripley, Transcendentalist Dreamer" [Methodology: intellectual and cultural history]

Final paper draft due

Week Eleven: Poetry

Primary Texts:

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet" (1844); Letter to Walt Whitman (July 21, 1855)
- Walt Whitman, Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855); Letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson (August 1856); "Song of Myself" (1891-92 edition); "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (1891-92 edition)
- Emily Dickinson, Poems 258 ("There's a certain slant of light"), 285 ("The Robin's my Criterion for Tune"), 314 ("Nature—sometimes sears a Sapling"), 324 ("Some keep the Sabbath going to Church"), 448 ("This was a Poet—It is That"), 1427 ("To see the Summer Sky")
- William Butler Yeats, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (1890)
- Robert Frost, "Mowing" (1913); "Nothing Gold Can Stay" (1923); "Two Tramps in Mud Time" (1936); "Directive" (1946)

Secondary Texts:

- George Monteiro, *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance* (1988), ch. 1, "Directive"; ch. 8, "Economy" [Methodology: close reading; influence studies]
- Catherine Tufariello, "'The Remembering Wine': Emerson's Influence on Whitman and Dickinson" (1999) [Methodology: literary history; influence studies]

Week Twelve: The Contemporary Novel

Primary Texts:

- Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (1980)

Secondary Texts:

- Sarah D. Hartshorne, "Lake Fingerbone and Walden Pond: A Commentary on Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*," *Modern Language Studies* (Summer 1990) [Methodology: comparative reading]
- Martha Ravits, "Extending the American Range: Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*," *American Literature* (December 1989) [Methodology: literary history/influence studies; feminist criticism]

Week Thirteen: The Silver Screen

Primary Texts:

- Terrence Malick, *The Tree of Life* (2011), screening time and place TBD

First half-hour of this week's class will discuss the Malick film; in the remaining time we will workshop final papers. Students will circulate and review one another's drafts in advance of class.

Time/place TBA: Junior tutorial final paper conference

Reading Period: Final paper due

COURSE POLICIES:

Attendance: Regular attendance and participation are crucial to the success of the tutorial, and unexcused absences will lower your participation grade. If you're unable to attend a section meeting, please let me know as soon as possible.

Email Policy: I'll make every effort to respond to emails within 24 hours during the week, and by Monday afternoon for emails received over the weekend. Please try to do likewise with tutorial-related emails from me and from your peers over the course of the term.

Electronic Device Policy: "Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things." In keeping with Thoreau's admonition, and to encourage active discussion, the use of laptops and other electronic devices is disallowed during discussion, except as needed to review PDFs of texts being discussed. (I'd prefer that you bring hard copies if possible.)

Visiting Office Hours: Please feel free to stop by my office hours for any reason at all, whether it's to discuss the progress of your research or just to chat. Please sign up for a 15-minute appointment at the link above. If the regular time doesn't work for you, email me and we can set up another time.

Written Assignments: Extensions of written assignments for good cause must be requested at least five days in advance of the due date. Unexcused late papers will be penalized one grade increment per day. Page limits (both minimum and maximum) will also be enforced.

Academic Honesty: As always, you are responsible for understanding and adhering to Harvard's Honor Code, which provides: "Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one's own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs."

Accommodations: "Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in the Course Head's inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation."