**We looked at the purpose of faith in Early American Lit, as well as the role of faith, morality and (lack of) reason in the Salem Witch Trials. Keep this idea of the interaction of faith, morality, and reason in this new time period…you will now be introduced to the ideas of romanticism and dark transcendentalism. You will explore the role of faith, morality, and reactions to reason through transcendental thinking, and learn how to connect transcendental ideas to their own life today.**

Transcendentalism Introduction

Is it space travel? Reincarnation? A way to cross between worlds on a bridge of stars? Some type of New Age meditation practice?

Um, no. But also, in a way, yes (aside from the space travel one). Because it does refer to a new perspective on the world—at least, new in the first of half of the 19th century in America—in the form of a literary and spiritual reawakening that got its start in Massachusetts in the 1830s when a group of folks took a look at nature and went, "Huh. Neat."

But the Transcendentalists were not only literary men and women who had a thing for trees; they were religious and social reformists with a master plan. They believed that we needed to re-think the way we live our lives in order to reconnect to God, and not through the Church, but instead—yep, you guessed it—through nature.

And how might we do that? For starters, we needed to develop our sense of individuality. According to them, we're all constrained by social pressures and conventions that lead us away from our true selves, and away from happiness. Pretty bogus on the part of society, huh?

The Transcendentalists, therefore, felt that we needed to undergo a reincarnation of sorts. We had to let go of our dependence on society, and we needed to embrace nature. By doing that, we would not only find ourselves, we would also find God. Pretty good as far as a package deal goes. So the Transcendentalists wrote countless essays, poems and articles articulating these views.

While the Transcendentalists were a small and controversial group when they first got going in the 1830s, their influence on American literature and culture has been very long-lasting. Individualism, that most sacred of American values, is prized today in American culture largely thanks to the Transcendentalists, who were the first to teach us the importance of following our own hearts and minds.

Why Should I Care?

Isn’t it nice that we have national parks? The [Grand Canyon](http://www.nps.gov/grca/index.htm), [Big Sur](http://www.bigsurcalifornia.org/), [Yellowstone](http://www.nps.gov/yell/index.htm)? Even if we've never gone hiking up the granite mountains of [Yosemite National Park](http://www.nps.gov/yose/index.htm), or been awestruck by those ginormous trees in Big Sur, we sure like looking at pictures of them, whether [hugging those redwoods](http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_4tkeEwkbvWU/TAqhuuIso6I/AAAAAAAAACc/hNymYum8dNo/s1600/me+hugging+tree.jpg) in our own world or speeding through them [in a galaxy far, far away](http://img2-3.timeinc.net/ew/dynamic/imgs/081002/jedi-speeder-bike_l.jpg).

If we're glad that our national parks exist (and who wouldn't want Grand Canyon National Park *not*to exist?) then we had better pay attention to the Transcendentalists. Many of the [conservationists](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/connections/conservation/history.html) who fought for the establishment of national parks in the 1860s were inspired by Transcendentalist authors like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who taught us just how beautiful, and inspiring, our awesome natural habitat can be.

Don't like nature? Most folks may not agree, but that's cool—you've got a right to your own opinion. And individualism—that's a key takeaway from Transcendentalism too, delivered straight to your modern-day door on an eco-friendly redwood platter.