

Romanticism vs. Transcendentalism

What is the Difference between Romanticism and Transcendentalism? by: Katie Berman

Transcendentalism and Romanticism were two literary movements that occurred in America during roughly the same time period (1840—1860). Although the two had surface similarities, such as their reverence for Nature, their founding beliefs were quite different, enough to make one seem almost the antithesis of the other.

One major difference between the two was their view of God and God's role in the lives of people. Transcendentalism was based largely on the idea that God is an internal force and that, as His creations, every person and everything has within it a divine spark or an "inner light." The ultimate goal of the human experience, therefore, was to connect to that inner light, and therefore to the so-called "Over-Soul"—that part of God which unifies all living things. Romanticism, on the other hand, had comparatively less to do with God. God, when mentioned, was seen as an external force as opposed to a divine spark within human nature. Romanticism was concerned with the grotesque as well as the sublime, and literary works of this genre are often concerned with the battle between the two within the individual. Many Romantics believed in an inherent darkness in human nature, as well as an inherent light. Because of the difference in these views on God, most Romantic authors did not share the optimism of their Transcendentalist contemporaries.

Another difference between Romanticism and Transcendentalism is the belief in the inherent goodness or inherent dark side of human beings, which is tied very closely to the two movements' views on God. Romanticism was concerned with the "spirit of perverseness" in human nature; on a larger scale, with the great "flaw in the universe." Nathaniel Hawthorne explored the effects of guilt, sin, and misery on the human spirit; many other Romantic works are based on the thought that everything may not be okay. This directly opposes the Transcendentalist view of the ultimate goodness of people and of the universe. According to Transcendentalism, innate goodness in the human spirit is a given, due to the "inner light." All people carry a part of God within their soul; therefore, inherent goodness is unavoidable because we are all God. This was described as "ultimate goodness beyond explanation;" in *Conversations With God*, it's explained in more specific terms as *that which the spirit comprehends deeply, but which the mind can barely conceive*. To the Transcendentalists, there was no "flaw in the universe." There was only God.

A final difference between these two literary movements was the style in which their authors wrote. Romanticism is largely defined by its style, which stresses the use of intuition over reason and effect versus details. Romantic writing uses large contrasts, between good and evil, darkness and light. It gives the general effect of a dream world. The narrators are given to both insanity and flights of fancy; and the line between the two is often blurred. Romanticism was also concerned with the physical world. The writing appeals to the reader's senses. Transcendentalism, too, relates more to the senses than to reason and facts, but its style cannot be described. Every Transcendentalist writer wrote differently; their works are grouped together due to their content, not the manner in which they were written. The writing is also concerned more with the journey of the spirit, rather than that of the body or the mind. There were significant differences between Transcendentalism and Romanticism, especially in their views of the purpose of life and their ideas of God and the human spirit. But they had similarities, too. These, along with the time frame of both movements, seem to indicate that Transcendentalism was the natural outcome of Romanticism. Romantics fought for the rights of the individual on the physical plane; once those are achieved, the next step is into Transcendentalist thinking, that there is more there than just what happens to one's physical being. The rights of the spirit, as well as the rights of the body, begin to be considered. Rather than being diametrically opposed, one is merely the result of the other. Neither movement could have flourished without the other—Transcendentalism began in the realm of Romanticism, and Romanticism would have died alone and forgotten had it not been for the continuation of some of its basic ideas through the Transcendentalist movement. Two things can be very different and still be of vital importance to each other.

In Summary...

1. Romanticism educes strong emotions and exemplifies significant events. Romanticism is not about soft music, candlelit dinners, or fine dining. It is about a strong motivational force that focuses on patriotism, loyalty, and allegiance. Transcendentalism is the power of knowledge to transcend intellectual growth and spirituality. It also highlights the power of divinity, nature, and individualism.
2. Romanticism exemplifies the importance of emotions and freedom over intellectual growth. They believe that everyone should follow what they're feeling. Transcendentalism draws inspiration from the beyond or external to the human perspective even beyond reasoning and normal traditions.
3. Romanticism doesn't heavily emphasize the power of God as the center of the universe; however, transcendentalism strongly believes in God, divination, and the truth of miracles. This is unlike the transcendentalists who believed that God is the center of the universe and respect should be given to Him.
4. Transcendentalism literature is very sensible and creates an exaggeration on good vs. evil. Ralph Waldo Emerson is one of the most famous of the transcendentalists. He believed that wisdom and self-realization are the keys for growth. The lack of self growth and terror amongst fellows generates evil, while happiness and generosity are the good results of an act.