American Transcendentalism

- Partly a reaction to 18th C. rationalism and Deism; partly a reaction against New England Calvinism
- Embraced ideas of the English and German Romantics, particularly the sublime.
- Wanted rejuvenate belief system by focusing on the mystical aspects of religion rather than on dogma.
- The heart of the American Renaissance.

Some key aspects:

- Distinction between “Understanding” and “Reason.” “Understanding” was the normal way of understanding the world through our senses. “Reason” was a higher, more intuitive form of perception. According to Emerson, reason is "the highest faculty of the soul--what we mean by the soul itself; it never reasons, never proves, it simply perceives; it is vision." By contrast, "The Understanding toils all the time, compares, contrives, adds, argues, near sighed but strong-sighted, dwelling in the present the expedient the customary."
- Macrocosm/microcosm: each part of the natural world contains all within it. This happens with people as well with the concept of the “Oversoul.” All humans are connected; each person is a particle, but contains within him or her the soul of the whole. The spark of divinity is within people.
- Reliance on self, individualism.
- Symbolic world: each part of the world is meant to point to some higher spiritual truth
- The essential goodness of the human soul. Society is a corrupting influence, as is age, as humans are exposed to culture over time. “Man is god in ruins.”