

Title: Introducing the Transcendentalists
Program Subjects: Literature; Philosophy
Year Produced: 2012
Directed by: James H. Bride
Produced by: James H. Bride
Distributed by: Films for the Humanities & Sciences
Reviewed by: Timothy Hackman, University of Maryland
Format: DVD
Running Time: 50 minutes
Color or B&W: Color
Audience Level: Sr. High – General Adult
Review:

There is worthwhile information in *Introducing the Transcendentalists* on the lives and key works of Transcendentalism's two most important figures, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. But the program suffers overall from an uneven, disjointed presentation and an unclear audience. From the title one would expect that the film is intended for classroom use, as a tool for introducing Emerson and Thoreau to students, and the introductory chapter fulfills that expectation. The film begins with host James H. Bride (who also produced, directed, edited audio and video, and shot some of the video footage) and co-presenters giving a brief overview of Ralph Waldo Emerson's life before he quit the ministry to become a writer, lecturer, and one of America's most enduring public intellectuals. The introduction touches on Emerson's essays "Nature" and "Self-Reliance," placing the concept of self-reliance at the center of his developing philosophy. The discussion is pitched at a sufficiently high level for first- or second-year undergraduate English majors, and includes commentary from literature scholars, readings from Emerson and Thoreau's works, and the requisite photos and video footage of New England nature scenes and the authors' graves and houses.

Then the program shifts gears abruptly, moving to a series of short (two to four minutes each) segments on "Appreciating the Transcendentalists" wherein Richard H. Baker, a Professor of English at the Noble & Greenough School (a boarding school for grades seven through twelve in Dedham, MA) discusses how to introduce Emerson's writing and philosophy in the secondary English classroom. The chapters cover the essays "The Transcendentalist," "The American Scholar," "Experience," "Nature," and "Thinking Like Emerson," in which Professor Baker offers suggestions for class projects. These chapters do discuss some of the big ideas in Emerson's essays, but they are targeted at teachers and would not be very useful for classroom screening, even though the short chapter format seems to indicate that this is their intended use.

Just as abruptly the film shifts to a segment in which Concord, MA historian and actor Richard Smith, dressed as Thoreau, wanders around the woods, studying plants and trees, while delivering monologues (largely composed of selections from *Walden* and other writings) on nature, society, and God. This portion seems intended for classroom use, but students above middle school age would likely find it a little too corny for it to be an effective teaching tool.

This interlude is followed by four more chapters from Professor Baker on "Appreciating the Transcendentalists," with information on how to approach "Walden," "Living Deliberately," "Symbolism," and Thoreau's principles in the classroom. The program concludes with "In the Footsteps of Henry David Thoreau," a video tour of a wintery Walden Pond with accompanying readings from

Walden, ending very abruptly with the declaration that, upon publication, the book went “unsold and unnoticed” for sixty years.

For the general reader who wants to learn more about the Transcendentalists, or for the high school teacher looking for a quick refresher before teaching the works of Emerson and Thoreau, this program may be adequate. Overall, the unevenness of the presentation (in addition to the awkward transitions and abrupt shifts in audience, there are out of focus shots and overly repetitive imagery of trees and gravestones) makes it difficult to recommend. Recommended with reservations for public and community college libraries; not recommended for four-year colleges or universities.

Reviewer Rating: Recommended with Reservations