

# American Literature, 3rd Week

## ▶ Transcendentalism and Emerson's Writings



# Transcendentalism

- ▶ **Transcendentalism**, neither a religion nor a philosophy, a belief in a higher reality than that found in sense experience or in a higher kind of knowledge than that achieved by human reason.
- ▶ Nearly all transcendentalist doctrines stem from the division of reality into a realm of spirit and a realm of matter.

# Transcendentalism

## *Transcendentalism*

- ▶ <http://www.transcendentalists.com/what.htm>

A literary and philosophical movement, associated with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller, asserting the existence of an ideal spiritual reality that transcends the empirical and scientific and is knowable through intuition

# Source 1

- ▶ The philosophical concept of transcendence was developed by the Greek philosopher Plato.
- ▶ In its most specific usage, transcendentalism refers to a literary and philosophical movement that developed in the U.S. in the first half of the 19th century.
- ▶ Transcendentalism also involved a rejection of the strict Puritan religious attitudes that were the heritage of New England, where the movement originated.

## Source 2

- ▶ More important, the transcendentalists were influenced by British Romanticism,
- ▶ especially such aspects as self-examination,
- ▶ the celebration of individualism,
- ▶ and the extolling of the beauties of nature and humankind.

- ▶ Consequently, transcendentalist writers expressed semi-religious feelings toward nature, as well as the creative process, and saw a direct connection, or correspondence, between the universe (macrocosm) and the individual soul (microcosm).
- ▶ In this view, divinity permeated all objects, animate or inanimate, and the purpose of human life was union with the so-called Over-Soul.

## Source 3

- ▶ The writings of Emanuel Swedenborg
- ▶ Swedenborg believed in the unity of God, rather than the Trinity, and our responsibility for our salvation. (Emerson claims that Jesus was a man.)

# How you Approach the Transcendent

- ▶ Intuition (spontaneous instinct), rather than reason, was regarded as the highest human faculty.
- ▶ Fulfillment of human potential could be accomplished through mysticism or through an acute awareness of the beauty and truth of the surrounding natural world.
- ▶ This process was regarded as inherently individual, and all orthodox tradition was suspect. So *intuition*, instead of tuition.



# What is the Soul?

- ▶ Who knows? Emerson says, “If we ask whence this [soul] comes, if we seek to pry into the soul that causes, all philosophy is at fault.”
- ▶ The over-soul = God + Nature + you
- ▶ Since the soul has to do with the condition, and the limitation, of our perception of reality, we cannot know it. We can only approach it.

# No Evil

- ▶ God is perfection.
- ▶ Man is perfectible (through his connection to God.)
- ▶ Nature expresses God. The laws of Nature is in harmony with those in each of us.
- ▶ Evil=the absence of goodness

# Trivialities

- ▶ American transcendentalism began with the formation (1836) of the Transcendental Club in Boston.
- ▶ Among the leaders of the movement were the essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, the feminist and social reformer Margaret Fuller, the preacher Theodore Parker, the educator Bronson Alcott, the philosopher William Ellery Channing, and the author and naturalist Henry David Thoreau.

# Some Trivialities

- ▶ The Transcendental Club published a magazine, *The Dial*, and some of the club's members participated in an experiment in communal living at Brook Farm, in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, during the 1840s.
- ▶ Major transcendentalist works of the American movement include Emerson's essays "Nature" (1836) and "Self-Reliance" (1841), as well as many of his metaphysical poems, and also Thoreau's *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854), which is an account of an individual's attempt to live simply and in harmony with nature.

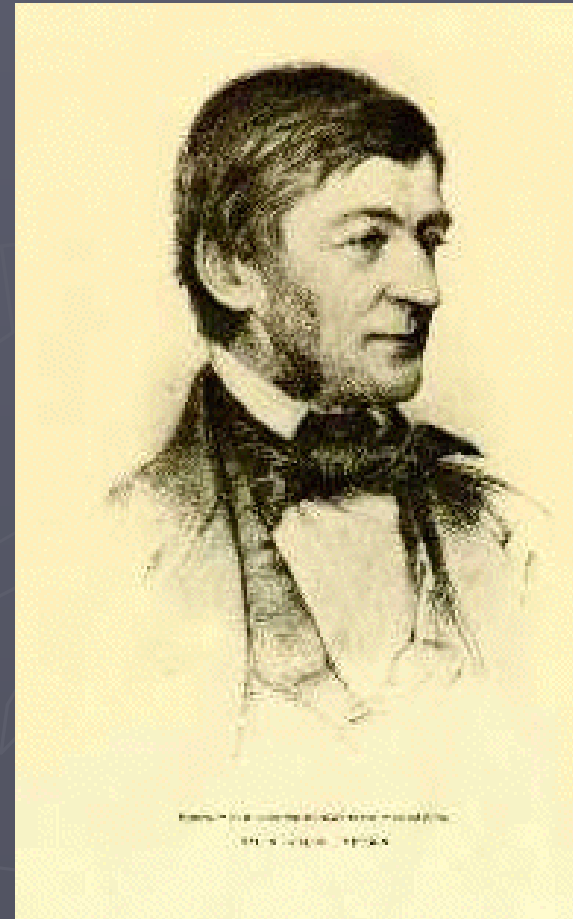
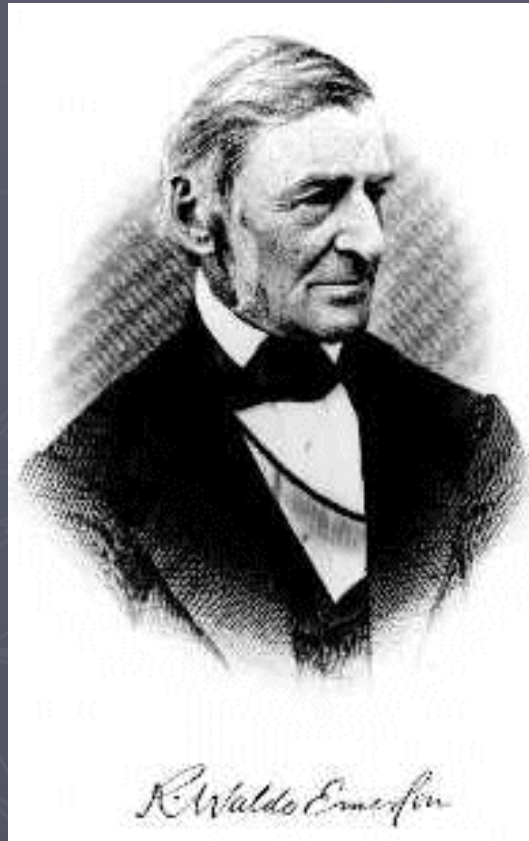
# Basically, Three Beliefs

- ▶ Correspondence between the universe and the individual soul.
- ▶ Contemplating objects in nature, people can transcend the world and discover union with the Over-soul.
- ▶ Follow your-own intuition and own beliefs, however divergent from the social norm they may be.

# Thoreau's Oneness with Nature

- ▶ “The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature,—of sun and wind and rain, of summer and winter,—such health, such cheer, they afford forever! . . . Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?” from *Walden*

# Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)



# The Importance of Emerson

- ▶ The key intellectual figure of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America
- ▶ Emerson's writings help establish the philosophy of individualism, an idea deeply embedded in American culture
- ▶ Emerson declared that true religion resides within the individual, not in Christianity.
- ▶ Emerson was the first to define what made American poetry American--a verse that celebrates democracy and ordinary experience.



# Ralph Waldo Emerson

(1803-1882)



There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better for worse as his portion; that though the wise universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried.

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Excerpt from "Self-Reliance"

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# *Nature, 1836*

- ▶ His most detailed statement of belief was reserved for his first published book, *Nature* (1836), which became the unofficial manifesto of the Transcendental Club, founded in 1836.
- ▶ This idealist doctrine opposed the popular materialist views of life and at the same time voiced a plea for freedom of the individual from artificial restraints.

# Three Major Underlying Ideas in *Nature*

- ▶ The primacy of the soul
- ▶ Nature as the Image of God
- ▶ The immediacy of God
- ▶ (494, 494, 503, 507, 509, 512, 514)

# "The American Scholar," 1837

- ▶ Emerson applied these ideas to cultural and intellectual problems in his 1837 lecture "The American Scholar," which he delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard.
- ▶ Oliver Wendell called that speech "our intellectual Declaration of Independence"

# Organization of Paragraphs

- ▶ 1-7: Introduction
- ▶ 8-9: The influence of nature on the education of the thinking man
- ▶ 10-20: The influence of the past (books) on the education of the thinking man
- ▶ 21-30: The influence of action on the education of the thinking man
- ▶ 31-45: duties of the American scholar

# Divinity School Address

- ▶ Delivered in 1838 to the graduating class of Cambridge Divinity College, aroused considerable controversy because it attacked formal religion and argued for self-reliance and intuitive spiritual experience.
- ▶ Intuited religion over inherited religion

# “Self-Reliance”

- ▶ On the familiar Emersonian thesis—Trust thyself
- ▶ Self-reliance over dependence or conformity

# “The Poet”

- ▶ The American poet is an interpreter of nature. (1-9)
- ▶ He uses common people’s language. (10-18)
- ▶ Through imagination he helps people experience transcendental visions. (19-29)
- ▶ He is to express the particular beauty of the continent and its people.(30-33)



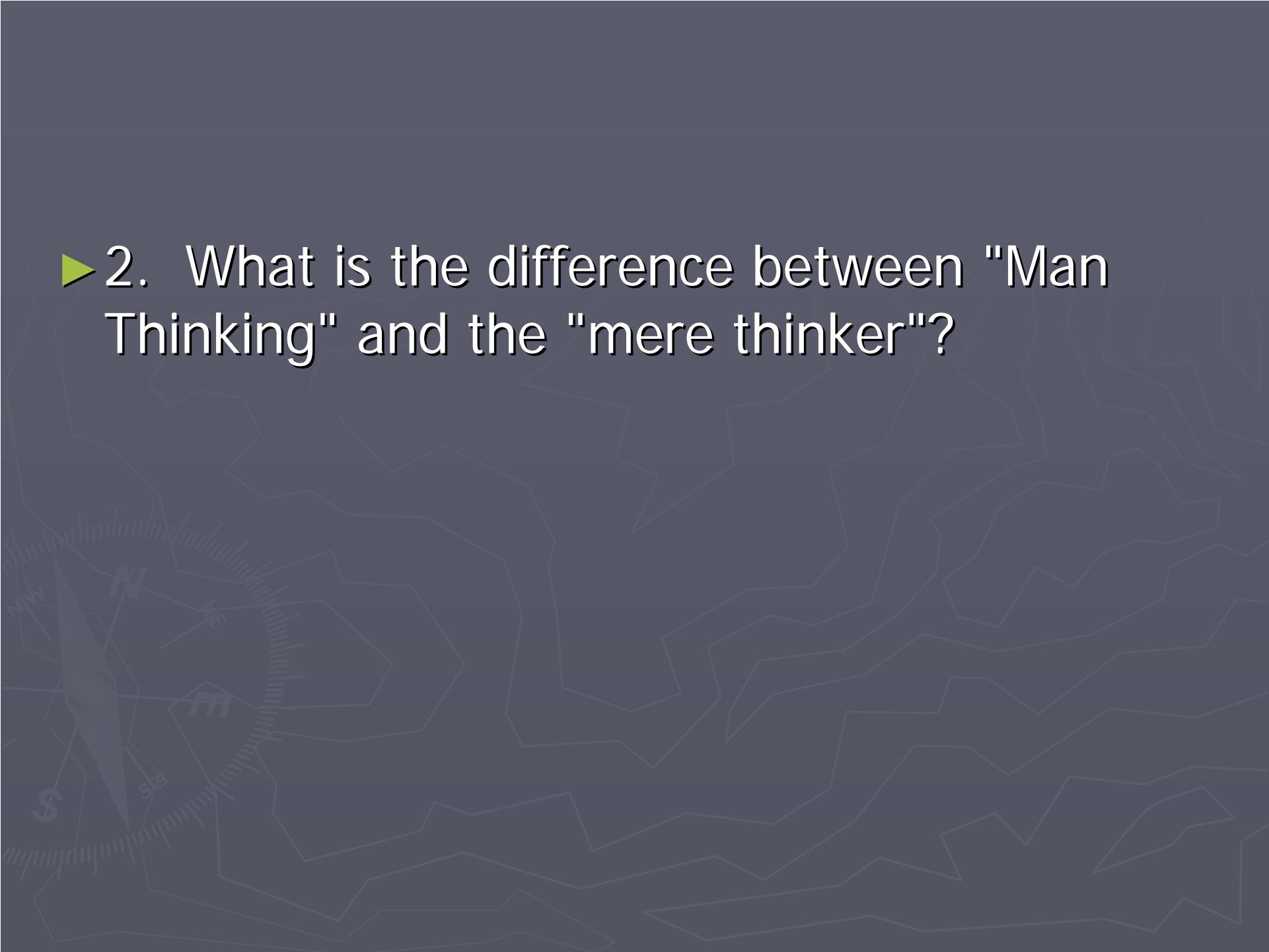
# Question, Nature

- ▶ What does Emerson mean when he says he becomes "a transparent eye-ball" ?



# American Scholar, Questions

- ▶ 1. What complaints does Emerson have about American culture?

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- ▶ 2. What is the difference between "Man Thinking" and the "mere thinker"?

- ▶ 3. What is the relationship between nature and the human mind?



- ▶ 4. What is the proper use of books? 5. What place does action have in the life of the scholar? 6. What are the social duties of the American scholar? 7. What "signs of the times" does Emerson perceive and what significance does he find in them?

► 4. What is the proper use of books?

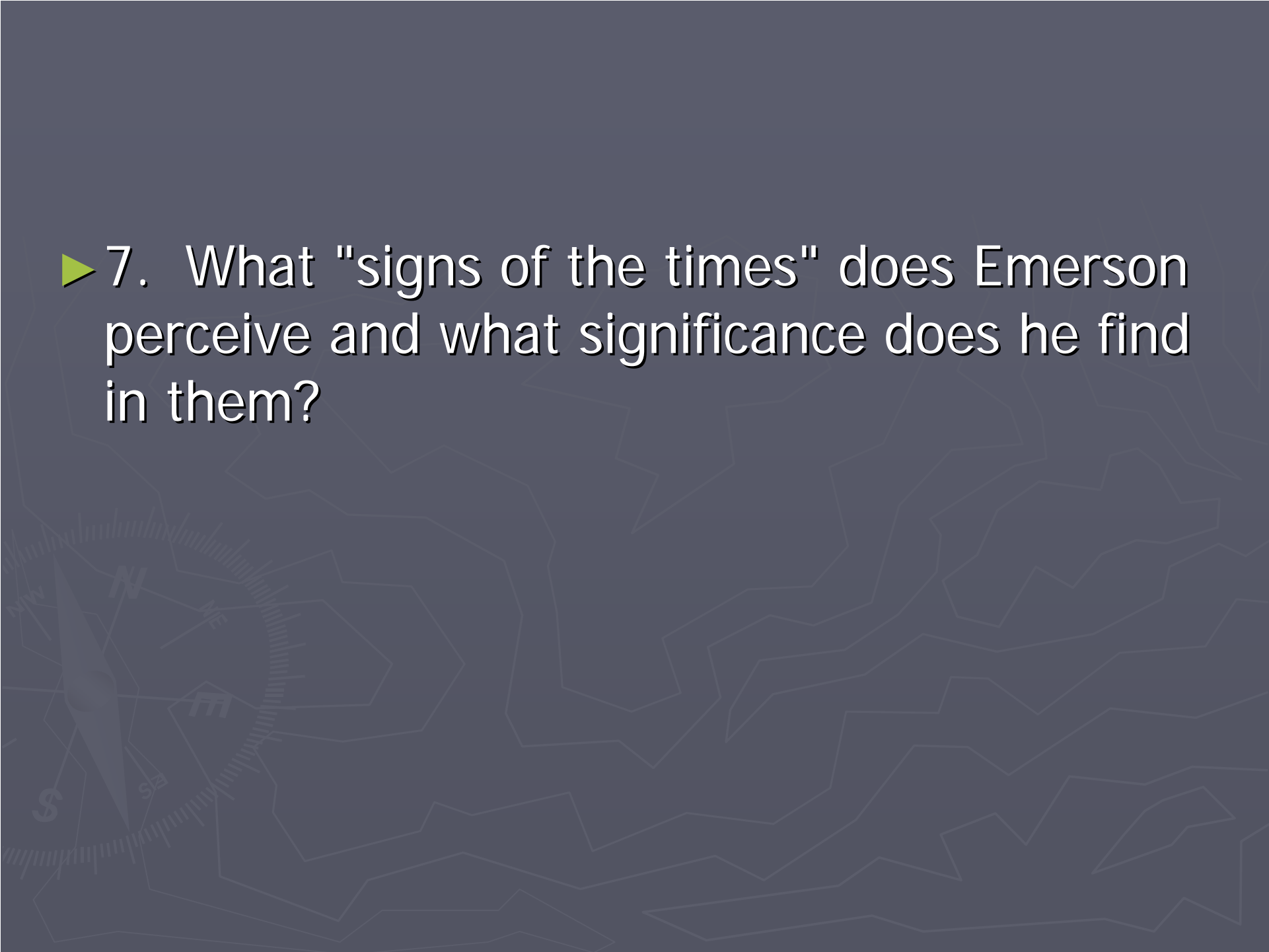


- ▶ 5. What place does action have in the life of the scholar?



▶ 6. What are the social duties of the American scholar?



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- ▶ 7. What "signs of the times" does Emerson perceive and what significance does he find in them?

# Question, Transcendentalism

- ▶ 1. What are three basic beliefs of transcendentalism? How does the human ego fit into transcendentalism?