

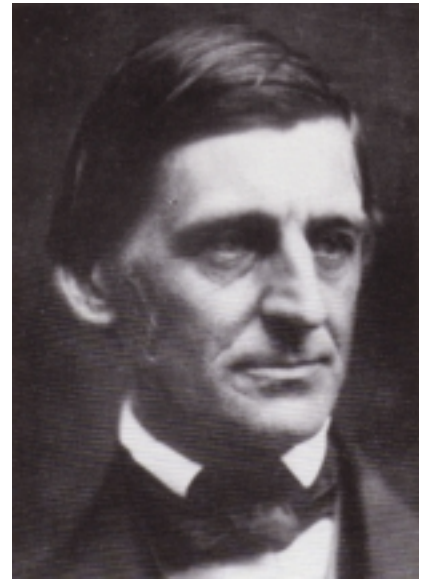
# Ralph Waldo Emerson

**From:** Concord, Massachusetts

**Lived:** 1803-1882

**Bio:** Poet, essayist, wrote *Nature* (1836) and “Self-Reliance” (1841).

**Descended from a line of New England ministers, Emerson set out to be a Unitarian parson, then quit before he was thirty. Travelling to Europe, he became steeped in the Romantic ideas then in vogue. Returning to America, he settled in Concord and took to the lecture circuit, where he became the high priest of transcendentalism, a sort of secular minister preaching the gospel of optimism, self-reliance, and man’s unlimited potential.**



1. To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men,—that is genius. Speak your latent conviction and it shall be the universal sense; for always the inmost becomes the outmost and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the last judgment.... A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognise our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.... **(Self-Reliance)**
2. There comes 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 wide 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.... **(Self-Reliance)**
3. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company in which the members agree for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.  
Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind.... **(Self-Reliance)**
4. I do not wish to expiate, but to live. My life is not an apology, but a life. It is for itself and not for a spectacle. I must much prefer that it should be of a lower strain, so it be genuine and equal, than that it should be glittering and unsteady.... My life should be unique; it should be an alms, a battle, a conquest, a medicine.... I know that for myself it makes no difference whether I do or forbear those actions which are reckoned excellent. I cannot consent to pay for a privilege where I have intrinsic right.... **(Self-Reliance)**
5. A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.... [I]f you would be a man, speak what you think to-day in words as hard as cannon balls, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day. Ah, then, exclaim the aged ladies, you shall be sure to be misunderstood. Misunderstood! It is a right fool’s word. Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood. **(Self-Reliance)**
6. Perhaps the time is already come, when it ought to be, and will be, something else; when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids, and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill. Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions, that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests. Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves. **(The American Scholar)**
7. The poet, in utter solitude remembering his spontaneous thoughts and recording them, is found to have recorded that, which men in crowded cities find true for them also. The orator distrusts at first the fitness of his frank confessions, — his want of knowledge of the persons he addresses, — until he finds that he is the complement of his hearers; — that they drink his words because he fulfils for them their own nature; the deeper he dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds, this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true. The people delight in it; the better part of every man feels, This is my music; this is myself. **(The American Scholar)**

# Henry David Thoreau

**From:** Concord, Massachusetts

**Lived:** 1817-1862

**Bio:** Author; *Walden* (1854) and “Civil Disobedience” (1849)

Emerson’s friend and Concord neighbor, Henry David Thoreau practiced the self-reliance that Emerson preached. On July 4, 1845 he took to the woods to live in a cabin he had built beside Walden pond. He wasn’t out to lead a hermit’s life, rather he wanted to demonstrate that a person could free himself from the products and rhythms of commerce and industrialism. While Thoreau was at Walden, the Mexican War broke out. He believed it unjust and that it advanced the cause of slavery, so he refused to pay his state poll tax as a gesture of opposition. He spent a night in jail, was bailed out by an aunt who paid the tax, but out of the incident grew the classic essay, “Civil Disobedience.”



1. The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. (**Walden**)

2. It is never too late to give up our prejudices. No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof. What everybody echoes or in silence passes by as true to-day may turn out to be falsehood to-morrow, mere smoke of opinion.... What old people say you cannot do, you try and find that you can. Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new.... I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me anything to the purpose. Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me; but it does not avail me that they have tried it. If I have any experience which I think valuable, I am sure to reflect that this my Mentors said nothing about. (**Walden**)

3. I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived....[W]e live meanly, like ants.... Our life is frittered away by detail.... The nation...is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense.... The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity!... I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary.... [And] in proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them. (**Walden**)

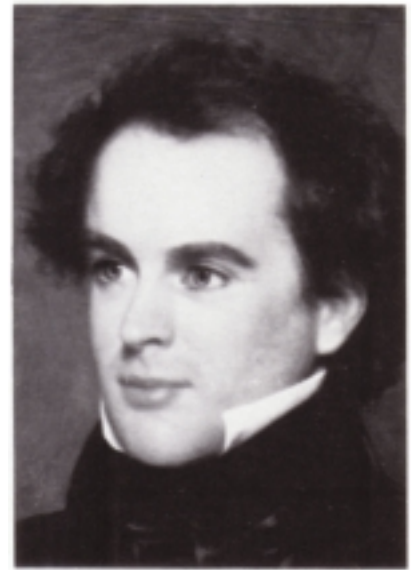
4. I heartily accept the motto,—“That government is best which governs least;” and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe,—“That government is best which governs not at all;” and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have.... The progress from an absolute to a limited monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress toward a true respect for the individual. Is a democracy, such as we know it, the last improvement possible in government? Is it not possible to take a step further towards recognizing and organizing the rights of man?... Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think right. (**Civil Disobedience**)

# Nathaniel Hawthorne

**From:** Salem, Massachusetts

**Lived:** 1804-1864

**Bio:** Author; *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The Blithedale Romance* (1854)  
Sometime resident of Concord, but a native and longtime resident of Salem, Hawthorne was haunted by the knowledge of evil bequeathed to him by his Puritan forebears—one of whom had been a judge at the Salem witchcraft trial. Hawthorne attended Bowdoin, then worked in obscurity in Salem, writing stories which were eventually collected in *Twice-Told Tales* (1837). In these as in his later works, his themes were the examination of sin and its consequences: pride and selfishness, secret guilt, selfish egotism, the impossibility of rooting sin out of the human soul. *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) embodied those themes in Hester Prynne, who wins redemption by her silent suffering under her badge of shame; Arthur Dimmesdale, who is destroyed by his gnawing guilt; and Roger Chillingworth, who is made malevolent and inhuman by his obsession with vengeance.



There is a fatality, a feeling so irresistible and inevitable that it has the force of doom, which almost invariably compels human beings to linger around and haunt, ghostlike, the spot where some great and marked event has given the color to their lifetime; and still the more irresistibly, the darker the tinge that saddens it.



# Emily Dickinson

**From:** Amherst, Massachusetts

**Lived:** 1830-1886

**Bio:** Poet

Dickinson was born in 1830 in Amherst where her grandfather had been a leader in founding Amherst College. Her father was a successful lawyer, a member of Congress, a college trustee, and a conservative. Emily's rebellion was intensely personal, private. She had two failed attempts at romance, then began to withdraw into the known spaces of her home and her poetry. Few (perhaps seven) of her 1,800 poems were published in her lifetime. The rest were squirreled away in little scrolls, carefully kept in a drawer.

## *A Bird came down the Walk*

A Bird came down the Walk—  
He did not know I saw—  
He bit an Angleworm in halves  
And ate the fellow, raw,  
And then he drank a Dew  
From a convenient Grass—  
And then hopped sidewise to the Wall  
To let a Beetle pass—  
He glanced with rapid eyes  
That hurried all around—  
The looked like frightened Beads,  
I thought  
He stirred his Velvet Head  
Like one in danger, Cautious,  
I offered him a Crumb  
And he unrolled his feathers

And rowed him softer home—  
Than Oars divide the Ocean, —  
Too silver for a seam —  
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon  
Leap, plashless as they swim.

## *Because I could not stop for Death*

Because I could not stop for Death--  
He Kindly stopped for me--  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves--  
And Immortality.

We slowly drove--He knew no haste  
And I had put away  
My labor and my leisure too,  
For His Civility--



# Herman Melville

**From:** New York

**Lived:** 1819-1891

**Bio:** Novelist; *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), *Moby-Dick* (1851), and *The Confidence Man* (1857)

After his father died, Melville shipped out as a seaman at age twenty. After 18 months at sea, he began ship-jumping, visiting many of the islands of the South seas. From his adventures, he fashioned *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847) which were relatively straight adventure stories. Encouraged by their reception, he produced *Moby-Dick* (1851). In one way it's just another good adventure yarn. On a metaphorical level it is more interesting as the captain becomes himself a monster and destroyer who sacrifices his ship, his crew, and himself to his folly, leaving only one survivor to tell the story.

1. Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright.

2. One trembles to think of that mysterious thing in the soul, which seems to acknowledge no human jurisdiction, but in spite of the individual's own innocent self, will still dream horrid dreams, and mutter unmentionable thoughts.

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# Edgar Allan Poe

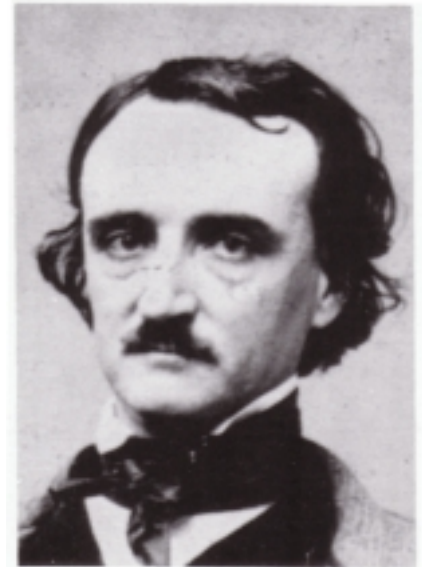
**From:** Richmond, Virginia

**Lived:** 1809-1849

**Bio:** Poet, author, critic; wrote "The Black Cat," "The Tell-tale Heart," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "The Raven"

Poe's parents were actors. When his father ran off and his mother died of consumption, he was raised by the Allans of Richmond. But he was unsteady, running off to West Point, where he flunked out. Returning South, he began a varied career as a writer and newspaperman.

As a poetry critic, Poe claimed that the object of poetry was beauty (not truth) and he preferred relatively short poems and stories to novels for their unity of effect.



## *Alone*

From childhood's hour I have not been  
As others were—I have not seen  
As others saw—I could not bring  
My passions from a common spring.

From the same source I have not taken  
My sorrow; I could not awaken  
My heart to joy at the same tone;  
And all I lov'd, I lov'd alone.