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The Second Great Awakening and Transcendentalism, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-americanlit1/chapter/reading-the-second-great-awakening-and-transcendentalism/>

Romantic Literature (1820–1860)

Historians estimate that only about 30–40% of Americans were members of churches or regularly attended church in the late-eighteenth century, but by 1850 the number was closer to 75–80%. Further, whereas at the end of the eighteenth century, the two largest religious denominations in the United States were the Congregationalists (the descendants of the Puritans) and the Episcopalians (the American version of the state-sponsored Anglican Church of the colonial era), by 1850 the Baptists and Methodists had become more numerous with a great dispersion of Protestants into numerous new denominations. This upsurge in religious activity, along with its concomitant shifts in theology and practice, changes to the social organization of religion, and developments in the relationship between religion and politics, has usually been termed the “Second Great Awakening,” as a way of referring to the earlier revival in Protestantism in the 1730s and 1740s in the colonies.

The Second Great Awakening rendered the nation more united in terms of a broadly accepted Protestantism even as it led to the multiplication of different sects and denominations. It helped propel numerous reform movements, most notably involving temperance and abolition, even as it attempted to return Christianity to its primitive roots. And it reinforced American beliefs in the individual's priority and agency even as it helped to bring a sense of community to a highly mobile populace. The Second Great Awakening transformed American religion and society in a number of ways and can be traced to a number of interrelated causes. Perhaps the most helpful way to begin understanding it is by emphasizing how different the dominant strains of Protestantism in 1850 were from those of the 1700s. By 1850, most Protestants had come to accept some version of Arminianism, the notion that God offers the possibility of salvation to any and all who accept Christ as their savior and through that acceptance undergo a true change of heart, a spiritual rebirth. This move towards the possibility of universal salvation represented a distinct break from Calvinism that had dominated American Protestantism throughout the colonial era. Calvinist theology holds that humankind, due to Adam's fall, is born sinful (innate depravity), and God will only save a select few (the elect) who have been chosen before time began. The saved can only passively accept a gift which they have not and could not possibly have earned. While the new Protestantism of the Second Great Awakening still emphasized a Gospel of Grace (only God could save the individual's soul) over a Gospel of Works (one could earn his way into heaven through good behavior), it stressed individual volition—the individual's choice to accept God's free gift of grace—in a way Calvinists never had. In doing so, this theological shift simultaneously weakened the idea of innate depravity. While all humans might be prone to sinfulness and only through God's help could they overcome those sinful tendencies, they were not doomed to sinfulness in a way older Calvinist theology sometimes seemed to suggest.

This theological shift both proceeded from and furthered social and political changes. In moving from an idea of the elect to the notion of universal salvation, this transformation followed the democratic emphasis of the American Revolution and its faith in the universal capacity of individuals to decide for themselves on personal and political matters. While much of the intellectual energy behind the

American Revolution was grounded in secular philosophy concerning natural rights, **American Protestantism had played an important role in the movement towards independence.** Much of the revolutionary fervor coming from American Protestantism centered on concerns about the imposition of religious beliefs through the established Anglican Church. While the Constitution's 1st Amendment assured that there would be no nationally established religion, the amendment was taken to apply only to the Federal government, and numerous states, especially in the northeast, maintained an established religion well into the nineteenth century. This meant that all citizens of the state were presumed to be members of the established church and could be taxed to support that church. By the 1830s, however, the Enlightenment's emphasis on individual reason and agency and continuing concerns about the tyranny of established religion from both secular and religious perspectives led to the disestablishment of churches in all the states. While some religious leaders feared that decoupling the church from state support would lead to a decline in faith, it instead led to the flourishing of religion, if in more dispersed form.

In place of being a state-sponsored institution, religious institutions came to take on some of the features of the marketplace, as individuals now could decide on their own with which church to associate. This emphasis on individual choice in the religious as well as the economic and political spheres was fundamental to the emergence of what has been called Jacksonian democracy. Where the majority of the founding fathers held deep reservations about expanding the franchise to all citizens and tended to believe that a democratic republic (with republic—the public good—emphasized over democracy) could only thrive if the masses deferred to their better educated, wiser betters, by the time Andrew Jackson was elected president in 1828 almost all states had lifted property restrictions on voting rights, thus opening elections to all adult white men. This overturning of long-standing assumptions of deference to an educated elite in the political arena was accompanied by a similar shift in religion. Not only did individuals feel empowered to make spiritual choices on their own, especially in the wake of the disestablishment of religion, but many of them took up the charge to preach. One of the distinct features of the Second Great Awakening, then, was the democratization of the clergy, as many barely literate men (and occasionally women), including both African Americans and American Indians, became church leaders and, sometimes, licensed ministers.

This emphasis on individual volition and choice paralleled a theological shift that echoed the Enlightenment's emphasis on humankind over the divine and on human agency over supernatural agency. In turn, against Calvinism's very weak notion of free will, the Protestant synthesis that emerged from this period stressed the individual's free choice and, relatedly, suggested that humans had some inborn tendency towards good. While Protestantism continued to foreground God's role in human transformation and salvation, the emerging synthesis emphasized to a much greater extent than earlier ministers and thinkers that the individual could decide for him or herself whether to accept salvation and that more physical, more worldly means could lead to salvation.

Charles Grandison Finney, one of the most important religious leaders during this period, can help to ground these theological innovations and connect them to the political and social changes undergirding them. Like many of the ministers and converts of the Second Great Awakening, Finney grew up in a relatively non-religious home. Self-educated, he was part of an emerging middle-class of professionals (he was originally a lawyer), artisans, and small farmers who would form the core of the Second Great Awakening. He came to adulthood in central and western New York, a region he nicknamed the burned over district to suggest how fervent the revival spirit became there. The Second

Great Awakening burned most brightly in similar areas throughout the Midwest, South, and Northeast, areas recently settled, consisting of displaced people seeking social and economic stability and simultaneously looking for a spiritual foundation to counterbalance the relative instability of their lives.

Finney became famous through his itinerant ministry, as he traveled the country conducting revivals. Much of the fervor and energy of the Second Great Awakening came through less formally established ministers who moved from place to place, attempting to bring as many believers to the faith as possible. **Finney famously stressed that revivals worked through “the right exercise of the powers of nature,” emphasizing the emotional roots of the spiritual transformation of rebirth over God’s direct, miraculous intercession.** Critics, especially from older established churches and more conservative theological positions, **rejected such revival spirit as nothing more than emotionalism,** as lacking in the intellectual and spiritual groundwork needed to assure salvation and a long-term commitment to Christ. They further attacked Finney for allowing women to take an active role in revival proceedings, for focusing on individuals by specifying them by name in prayers, and for using colloquial language, among other things. Their critique reiterates some of the most noteworthy features of the Second Great Awakening—its populist spirit, including its opening religious services to the participation of women, **and its emotional nature.** In particular, the Second Great Awakening has sometimes been seen in terms of the feminization of American religion, as women began to take a much more active role in a variety of Protestant denominations and Protestant theology took on a decidedly more sentimental cast, emphasizing the more maternal, loving vision of Jesus over the strict patriarchal Jehovah. Finally, Finney saw his Christianity as directly related to the social issues of the day, becoming a leader in the temperance movement and in abolitionism. **This shift in focus from theology to morality, from discerning the exact, abstract laws of God to feeling God’s truth and power internally and acting accordingly,** undergirded both the emotional appeal of much anti-slavery activity and other reform movements and the development of domestic sentimentalism as one of the most popular literary forms of the period.

At the same time, Finney’s differences from others within the Second Great Awakening suggest the disunity of the movement. While Finney was ordained a Presbyterian minister, he almost immediately broke with its Calvinist doctrine, leading to a convention where New Light Calvinists (such as Lyman Beecher) attempted to reconcile with Finney’s new ways. Where Beecher and the New Lights can be included within the Second Great Awakening, they represent a more conservative version of it— a reaction on the part of the established churches (here Presbyterian and Congregationalists) to revise their methods and theology to fit better with the new nation. Unlike other Calvinists, the New Lights saw religious experience as an essential component to salvation. They tended to embrace the idea of a sudden-rebirth into grace rather than foregrounding the importance of slow preparation for it. In that way, they anticipated and paralleled Finney, but they worried over his methods, seeing them as relying too heavily on worldly means. On the other hand, the fastest growing denominations of the era, the Baptists and Methodists, tended to go further than Finney in breaking with the older more denominations, yet tended to remain less committed to their Christianity becoming a guiding force in social and political reforms. The success of these denominations in the South paralleled their reticence on slavery, even as many Baptists and Methodists began to preaching to African Americans in broad numbers, leading to one of the Second Great Awakening’s most long-lasting impacts, the more thorough-going integration of African-American culture into American Protestantism. New faiths and denominations, such as the Church of Christ and the Church of the Latter Day Saints (the Mormons)

along with numerous offshoots and short-lived sects and utopian communities, moved even further from the older social and theological structures of American Protestantism.

Because of all these differences, a number of historians have disputed the usefulness of placing these disparate religious developments under the umbrella of the Second Great Awakening, arguing that it incorrectly links together largely disconnected, sometimes contradictory or conflicting developments within American Protestantism over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century. Yet most historians have agreed that although never centralized those changes followed many parallel tracks, emphasizing its overall tendency towards democratization of the ministry, its decentering of religious authority, its foregrounding of emotion, and its theological emphasis on universal salvation and individual rebirth through the active acceptance of Christ as one's savior. That is to say, that we need to understand the Second Great Awakening as a term for viewing a number of often disconnected intellectual, cultural, and social processes as moving towards similar endpoints. It is within this broader framework that we might consider transcendentalism, one of the most important American literary-philosophical movements of the nineteenth century, as part of the Second Great Awakening.

The next subunit of this course will explore the transcendentalists in more depth, but here it is important to place them within this broader context of religious fervor and upheaval. While, as we will see, the movement grew out of a number of philosophical, literary, and political developments and movements in the transatlantic world, in terms of American religion, transcendentalism most directly emerged out of Unitarianism. Unitarianism had represented the liberal development of New England Congregationalism growing out of the Enlightenment and the First Great Awakening. Where more traditional, if innovative, theologians and ministers such as Jonathan Edwards continued to hew to strict Calvinist beliefs in innate depravity and election, drawing on developments within the sensational psychology of John Locke and his followers to defend the use of emotion in the conversion process (thus paving the way for New Light Calvinism), the more liberal wing of Congregationalism tended to move away from the emphasis on humankind's incapacity to affect their own spiritual change due to their inherent sinfulness and to remain skeptical of what they saw as emotional excess. With the formal rejection of the trinity (instead of viewing Jesus as a part of God seeing him as a great spiritual leader), Unitarianism split from Congregationalism in the late-eighteenth century, exemplifying a type of Enlightenment Christianity that emphasized reason, progress, learning, stability, and harmony. While Unitarianism was still seen as heretical by more traditional Congregationalists, it had come to represent the established church in parts of New England by the 1820s, especially in the Boston area. Emerging in the 1830s, transcendentalism, in many ways, reacted against Unitarianism as others within the Second Great Awakening reacted against the more established denominations, rejecting what they saw as its cold rationality and its elitist tendencies in emphasizing doctrine and erudition over feeling. Many of the leading transcendentalists began as Unitarian ministers before abandoning what they saw as the restrictive theology and rituals in favor of less organized philosophical and personal explorations of the relations among the self, nature, and the divine. While the transcendentalists differed from the majority involved in the Second Great Awakening due to their own elite status (many were college-educated), the ways they grounded their focus on experience in their own eclectic learning, and their movement away from even the loosest religious community in favor of the individual's self-culture and away from Christianity to a form of naturalistic spirituality, **they paralleled the Second Great Awakening's attention to a kind of ecstatic, life-changing spiritual experience, their emphasis on the inner life and the individual conscience over book-learning, and their tendency to connect spiritual regeneration with moral and social change.**