AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM

1: a philosophy that emphasizes the a priori conditions of knowledge and experience or the unknowable character of ultimate reality or that emphasizes the transcendental as the fundamental reality
2: a philosophy that asserts the primacy of the spiritual and transcendental over the material and empirical
3: the quality or state of being transcendental; especially: visionary idealism

Overview
American transcendentalism was an important movement in philosophy and literature that flourished during the early to middle years of the nineteenth century (about 1836-1860). It began as a reform movement in the Unitarian church, extending the views of William Ellery Channing on an indwelling God and the significance of intuitive thought. It was based on "a monism holding to the unity of the world and God, and the immanence of God in the world" (Oxford Companion to American Literature 770). For the transcendentalists, the soul of each individual is identical with the soul of the world and contains what the world contains.

Transcendentalists wanted to rejuvenate the mystical aspects of New England and to go back to Jonathan Edwards' "divine and supernatural light," imparted immediately to the soul by the spirit of God.

Definitions
Lawrence Buell, New England Literary Culture (1986)
"Transcendentalism, in fact, really began as a religious movement, an attempt to substitute a Romanticized version of the mystical ideal that humankind is capable of direct experience of the holy for the Unitarian rationalist view that the truths of religion are arrived at by a process of empirical study and by rational inference from historical and natural evidence" (46).

Charles Mayo Ellis, An Essay on Transcendentalism (1842)
"That belief we term Transcendentalism which maintains that man has ideas, that come not through the five senses or the powers of reasoning; but are either the result of direct revelation from God, his immediate inspiration, or his immanent presence in the spiritual world. . . ."

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature (1836)
"Standing on the bare ground,--my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,--all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God" (996). See also Emerson's essay "The Transcendentalist."(1842)

Sources
Reaction against New England Calvinism
Reaction against eighteenth-century rationalism
Reaction against Lockean empiricism
Emerging ideal of American democracy
Emphasis on feeling; divinity and creative impulse in nature
The Romantic movement, especially Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the English romantics
Unitarianism
Eastern philosophy

Intuitive Knowledge
Transcendentalism affirmed Kant's principle of intuitive knowledge not derived from the senses. According to M. H. Abrams in A Glossary of Literary Terms, "Kant had confined the expression 'transcendental knowledge' to the cognizance of those forms and categories--such as space, time, quantity, causality—which, in his view, are imposed on perception by the constitution of all human minds; he regarded these aspects as the universal conditions of sense-experience. Emerson and others, however, extended the concept of transcendental knowledge, in a way whose validity Kant had specifically denied, to include an intuitive cognizance of moral and other truths that transcend the limits of human sense-experience" (216).
Transcendentalism, like other romantic movements, proposes that the essential nature of human beings is good and that, left in a state of nature, human beings would seek the good. Society is to blame for the corruption that mankind endures. Hawthorne's juxtaposition of the red rose, the flower of nature, and the rusty, blackened prison, the "black flower" of society, exemplifies this perspective. This view opposes the neoclassical vision that society alone is responsible for keeping human beings from giving in to their own brutish natures. Transcendentalism also takes the Romantic view of man's steady degeneration from childhood to adulthood as he is corrupted by culture: "A man is a god in ruins."

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) was an American writer. Hawthorne was born in Salem, Massachusetts to a family with a long New England history. The original name of the family was Hathorne, he added a 'w' to distinguish himself from the history which included John Hathorne, a prominent judge in the Salem witch trials of 1692-3. The Hathorne legacy was one of strict Puritanism which Hawthorne grappled with in his stories and novels, The Scarlet Letter perhaps being the most well-known. While Hawthorne was certainly a part of the American Transcendentalists, living in close proximity to Ralph Waldo Emerson during a few periods of his life, Hawthorne (and his wife Sophia) were reclusive and rather solitary. On occasion of his funeral Emerson wrote, "I thought there was a tragic element in the event, that might be more fully rendered,—in the painful solitude of the man, which, I suppose, could no longer be endured, & he died of it."

After graduation, Hawthorne spent time at his mother's home in Salem. From his journals it is apparent that he spent much of his time reading and writing. His inquiries at the Salem Athenaeum, the local library, led him to his ancestral roots and he read much about his Puritan past supplementing his family's influence in the colonies with reading by such developmental American writers as William Bradford, John Winthrop and Cotton Mather. During this time he also wrote many short stories although when his first try at getting a collection published failed he gave them to the fire. His first novel, Fanshawe, was published in 1828 anonymously, but it did not receive much attention. He persevered in his intent on being a writer and slowly began to get another collection of short stories published although not in one publication. Eventually, his schoolmate Horatio Bridge convinced him to publish under his own name and without Hawthorne's knowledge put up money to guarantee any losses with the publisher, Samuel G. Goodrich. Twice-Told Tales was a success, gathering a few favorable reviews one from his friend Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Once married, the young couple moved to Concord, Massachusetts and rented the Old Manse from Ralph Waldo Emerson. Embedded in the literary circle and Transcendental movement, the Hawthorne's lived quite the social life for their reclusive natures. Sophia took more to the ideas of transcendentalism while Nathaniel felt that there was a darkness and gloom that was overlooked by the Transcendentalist. Hawthorne continued to write short stories for publication.

The income from publishing short stories still left much to be desired and the couple moved in with Hawthorne's mother in Salem in 1845. Hawthorne took up a job at the Salem Custom House but since Boston had taken much of the seaport business from Salem, Hawthorne was left with time to accept the position of secretary of the Salem Lyceum which hosted speakers as well as spend time with his dear wife and burgeoning family. In 1848, Zachary Taylor won the presidency and with it, Hawthorne lost his job. The following year he experienced the loss of his mother, but it was also the year that Hawthorne found a worn letter "A" in the attic of the old home and with it came the inspiration to write his arguably most famous novel, The Scarlet Letter. The story of adulteress Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale was self-described by Hawthorne as a "hell-fired story" and he writes about reading it to Sophia that "It broke her heart and sent her to bed with a grievous headache, which I look upon as a triumphant success." The Scarlet Letter was one of the first mass-produced books in the United States upon its release in 1850 and it gathered much praise and criticism for the novels supposed morbidity.