

American Romanticism

1830(ish)-1860(ish)

Romanticism

- Romantic poets cultivated individualism, reverence for the natural world, idealism, physical and emotional passion, and an interest in the mystic and supernatural. Romantics set themselves in opposition to the order and rationality of classical and neoclassical artistic precepts to embrace freedom and revolution in their art and politics.

--Academy of American Poets

Historical Overview (European)

- Literary “Romanticism” refers to the period between 1770-1860
- Previously, Europe was in the throes of the “Enlightenment,” which lasts from 1660-1785 or so
- The Enlightenment focused on “Progress & Perfectibility” of man through the use of rational, logical discourse, social responsibility and action
- Locke: life, liberty, and property
- Rousseau: “The first man who, having fenced in a piece of land, said ‘This is mine,’ and found people naive enough to believe him, that man was the true founder of civil society. From how many crimes, wars, and murders, from how many horrors and misfortunes might not any one have saved mankind, by pulling up the stakes, or filling up the ditch, and crying to his fellows: Beware of listening to this impostor; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody.”
- The Enlightenment in Europe sees the beginnings of a class struggle that continues today, as feudal systems begin failing and a “middle-class” emerges
- Writers of the Enlightenment include: Voltaire, Swift, Kant, Locke, and Rousseau (the latter are arguably the most significant to American culture)

Viva la Revolución!

- Romantics were quite revolutionary in their thoughts and thought processes
- They saw revolution as the collective rejection of human suffering (even if it brought about more initially)
- No longer did they see logic as a tool reserved for philosophical essays; they sought to practice what the Age of Reason had so vehemently preached: Equality and Democracy
- Two revolutions set the stage for the coming movement: the American (1775) and the French (1789)

Historical Overview (American)

- Leading up to this period in America several events set the stage for revolution:
 - In 1754 the French & Indian War begins, pitting the French & English against one another (again!)
 - The British (and Colonial Americans) were victorious over the French (*Sacrebleu!*)
 - The war was the first time colonists came together in a unified and cohesive way to fight a common foe...and the Brits are in trouble...
 - The British officers often looked at the colonial militias as expendable and lower class (think about how this will contrast with Romantic & democratic values)
 - 1763 Treaty of Paris signals the end of the French threat to the British colonies and land

Historical Overview (American)

- There's a host of acts that occur between 1764 and 1774 that create new tensions on the colonists (Stamp, Townshend, Tea, and Intolerable are the most prominent of these taxing and controlling acts)...this throws Locke's notion of social contract into disarray
- In 1770, a group of angry Bostonians approach the British Customs house after a series of minor conflicts over trade
- The event becomes known as the Boston massacre when a group of British soldiers fires into the crowd killing five people
- Within three years, the Boston Tea Party occurs
- 1774, First Continental Congress convenes in Philadelphia with delegates from 12 of the 13 colonies (Georgia sat this one out...)
- Within five years, large scale skirmishes break out (in Boston, no less!)
- 1776, all 13 colonies sign the Declaration of Independence
- By 1783, the war is ending (under another Treaty of Paris) and the colonies are no more...

Democracy rules the day (sort of...)

- During the Enlightenment, the focus was on making man (and his societies) perfect. There is a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money spent on notions of what is “proper” and best (this comes back in the way of Victorianism in the mid-to-late 19th century)
- Romanticism is an outgrowth of post-Enlightenment thinking on “Natural” rights (natural rights owe some to Descartes’ dictum: *cogito ergo sum*)
- Romanticism is a rejection of the use of natural rights as an argument for the divine right of kings
- Valuation lies within the individual as a moral and ethical being
- Social contracts are the talk of the town previously: Locke says people have a contract with their governments, a responsibility to one another ensues; whereas Rousseau argues that individuals have contracts with one another, not with the government...
- But Romanticism will focus on fulfillment of individual needs or desires

On to Romanticism

- Romanticism is going to be a rejection of the stoic and archaic manipulations of logic or reason as social controls
- One thing that aids in the spread of democracy is that there is a spike in the reading populace with the advent of the printing press which carries the world out of the dark ages into the renaissance and finally into the Enlightenment
- Knowledge is now a personal endeavor, not a public or (always) political one
- Worldview is becoming fractured in a specific way because of, among other things, global exploration and travel

Romanticism

- There are 8 primary characteristics of Romantic works.
- The works are, typically:
 - Emotional (as opposed to reasonable)
 - Individualistic (rejection of both Locke and Rousseau, to an extent)
 - Revolutionary (as opposed to traditional in theme and form)
 - Solitary or Isolated (as opposed to urban and industrial)
 - Focused on Nature (as opposed to and in opposition to the industrial)
 - Fantastic or Exotic (as opposed to “reality”—really just more concerned with perception)
 - (Incredibly) Subjective (perception is everything, see W. Blake)
 - Ideal or Idealist in terms of philosophy (as opposed to materialistic)

American Romantics: the Top Five Rhetorical/Literary Moves of the Period

- Embrace the spirit of self-reliance (even before we have that phrase!) and individualism
- Use symbols, myths, motifs, or fantastic/exotic elements to convey deeper psychological or archetypal themes
- Believe that democracy elevates the common man to an equal status as any other man (sort of...)
- See the dignity in the common man and the “noble savage”
- Believe, ultimately, that man—in all his forms—is inherently good and that if man lives a just life, he shall reap the benefits

Am Romanticism

- Romanticism is the cult of the individual--the cultural and psychological birth of the I--the Self
- Belief in an inner spark of divinity that links one human being to another and all human beings to the larger “Truth”
- In poetry, visual art, and music, artists became increasingly preoccupied with articulating the personal experience that becomes, in turn, a representative one
- IMAGINATION becomes the source of artistic vision/creativity (during the neo-classical age, imagination was linked to “fancy,” which implied the fantastic, fictive, and even false)

Focus on the “Common”

- Concern for the common man: came from both the democratic changes of the age of Revolution, as well as an interest in folk culture
- In part, the search to preserve the stories, songs, legends, and verse of the common people came from a nationalistic impulse
 - E.g. in Germany, the Grimm brothers collected the fairy tales of their region and country while assembling a comprehensive dictionary of the German language (the German equivalent of Webster's in the 19th century!)
- But: the Folk Movement also produced an international language of human commonality, at whose center stood the images of home and the heart.

Nature

- For the Romantic, nature was a constant companion and teacher-- both benign and tyrannical
- Throughout all of Romantic literature, music, and art, Nature is a dynamic presence, a character who speaks in a language of symbols at once mysterious and anthropomorphic (i.e. speaking with a voice similar to human voice, i.e. sharing human qualities and characteristics, especially in personification of natural objects, phenomena, etc.)
- allows man to come into dialogue with the life-force
- Nature became
 - the stage on which the human drama was played
 - the context in which man came to understand his place in the universe
 - the transforming agent which harmonized the individual soul with what the Transcendentalists would call the Over-Soul.

Gothicism within Romanticism

Romanticism

- Emotional (as opposed to reasonable)
- Individualistic (as opposed to social; rejection of Locke and Rousseau)
- Revolutionary (as opposed to traditional in theme and form)
- Solitary or Isolated (as opposed to urban and industrial)
- Focused on Nature (in opposition to industrialism)
- Subjective (perception is everything!)
- Fantastic or Exotic (including the mysterious and supernatural)
- Idealist in terms of philosophy (as opposed to materialistic and pessimistically pragmatic)

Gothicism

- chronic sense of apprehension
- the premonition of impending, unidentified disaster
- the Gothic world is the fallen world
- the vision of fallen man, living in fear and alienation,
- the characters are haunted by images of a mythic expulsion, by its repercussions, and by an awareness of his unavoidable wretchedness
- Gothic heroes and heroines are on their own, stumbling alone, sometimes in foreign countries, through appalling complexities of decision and action, obliged to find their own solutions or go under;
- estrangement from family ties is their normal condition
- Protagonists are frequently orphans, or they are foundlings or adopted, their family origins mysterious

American Romantics: Ten to Know

- James Fenimore Cooper (noble savage/individualism)
- Emily Dickinson (individualism/spirituality/femininity)
- Fredrick Douglass (equality/individualism)
- Ralph Waldo Emerson (individualism/ self-reliance)
- Nathaniel Hawthorne (rejection of tradition; embracing of the mystical)
- Washington Irving (supernatural/ fantastic)
- Herman Melville (individualism/ spiritualism/ /fantasy/ isolation)
- Edgar Allen Poe (America's first 'emo' kid—gothicism)
- Henry David Thoreau (civil disobedience)
- Walt Whitman (individualism/ exotic/ nature/ fantasy)