

AMERICAN ROMANTICISM OVERVIEW ^{1[1]}

"Romanticism," as a term, derives from "romance," which from the Medieval Period (1200-1500) and on simply meant a story (e.g. all the chivalric, King Arthur legends) that was adventuristic and improbable. "Romances" are distinguished from "novels," which emphasize the mundane and realistic. The period between 1860 and 1900, for the U.S., is often called "The Age of Realism," because of the many authors (e.g., Theodore Dreiser & Stephen Crane) who present their novels' subject matter in a realistic manner (Melville's monomaniacal Ahab, chasing a monstrous, symbolic whale, would be out of place in a realistic novel, although *Moby-Dick* has many realistic details about the whaling industry).

The "Romantic Period" refers to literary and cultural movements in England, Europe, and America roughly from 1770 to 1860. Romantic writers (and artists) saw themselves as revolting against the "Age of Reason" (1700-1770) and its values. They celebrated imagination/intuition versus reason/calculation, spontaneity versus control, subjectivity and metaphysical musing versus objective fact, revolutionary energy versus tradition, individualism versus social conformity, democracy versus monarchy, and so on. The movement begins in Germany with the publication of Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (about a love-sick, alienated artist type, too sensitive to live, who kills himself; after it was published a number of young men committed suicide in imitation!) and the emergence of various Idealist philosophers (who believed mental processes are the ultimately reality, as opposed to Materialists). The movement then goes to England (Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, and Keats), until about 1830 (upon which the Victorian Age begins). Romanticism does not appear in the U.S. until Irving and Emerson are writing; so, somewhat confusingly, the Romantic Period in the U.S. (1830-1860) overlaps with the period in which U.S. culture may also be said to be "Victorian" (1830-1880). One consequence of the latter: a writer such as Hawthorne is both Romantic and Victorian (he is simultaneously fascinated by and worried about Hester's rebelliousness in *The Scarlet Letter*). Other works of the period--such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's best-seller *Uncle Tom's Cabin*--are not "Romantic," but are rather much closer to the realistic fiction of Victorian Britain's George Eliot.

Very generally, we also distinguish "Romantic" from "Classical" values and types of expression, without referring to any particular time period. Thus, you can come up with a list of atemporal oppositions:

ROMANTIC	NON-ROMANTIC/CLASSICAL
Emotional	Reasonable and Practical
Individualistic	Public Responsibility
Revolutionary	Conservative
Loves Solitude & Nature	Loves Public, Urban Life
Fantasy/Introspection	External Reality
The Particular	The Universal
Subjective Perception	Objective Science
Right Brain	Left Brain
Satisfaction of Desire	Desire Repressed

^{1[1]} This information is directly cited from Professor Bruce Harvey's American Literature webpage.

Organic	Mechanical
Creative Energy/Power	Form
Exotic	Mundane
"Noble Savage"/Outcasts	Bourgeois Family
Idealist Philosophy	Materialist/Empirical Philosophy

The problem with the attempt to define literary movements and particular literary/cultural periods is that authors seldom fit neatly into the boxes we construct for them. Emerson and Thoreau, along with Margaret Fuller, are Romantic, self-consciously part of a literary/philosophical/theological movement known as "Transcendentalism" (they had their own literary magazine, *The Dial*, which Fuller edited). They privileged imagination and wanted to resuscitate spiritual values in a era in which institutional religion dominated (or so they felt). According to them, we are, if we only knew it, Gods in ruin, with the power to regain our spiritual birthright by attending to the divine within. Poe, Dickinson, Melville, and Hawthorne, however, were not Transcendentalists, and often (implicitly or explicitly) critique Emersonian idealism. Poe--the most Romantic of all the authors, because he obsessively depicts sensitive, isolated individuals seeking the Beautiful or Ideal--was the least in step with the other writers we are reading: the other male writers celebrate democratic possibilities (and are often in love with the "common man"), whereas Poe scorns the masses. Poe's position on slavery was less than enlightened.

American Romantics tend to venerate Nature as a sanctum of non-artificiality, where the Self can fulfill its potential (the earlier Puritans tended to see nature as the fallen "wilderness," full of "savage" Indians). American Romantics also champion spiritual intuition or self-reliant individualism (which some intellectual historians argue is a secularized outgrowth of Reformation Protestant radicalism). They often, however, illustrate the egotistic, futile, and destructive aspects of their questing heroes. Or they highlight how such self-reliance or intuitions conflict with conventional social and religious dogma (Fuller and Dickinson). Socially, American Romantics are usually radically egalitarian and politically progressive (Poe is the exception) and, in the case of Melville and Whitman, receptive to non-heterosexual relations (Whitman was definitely gay; Melville perhaps). In terms of literary technique, American Romantics will use symbols, myths, or fantastic elements (e.g., Walden Pond, the White Whale, the House of Usher) as the focus and expression of the protagonist's mental processes or to convey deeper psychological or archetypal themes. Their style is often very original and not rule/convention oriented (only Dickinson writes like Dickinson; only Whitman, like Whitman).

The primary feature of American Romanticism--the obsession with and celebration of individualism--takes on particular social relevance because U.S. culture has always prized individualism and egalitarianism. Democracy elevates everyone (white males in this time period, that is) to the same status. One is no longer part of a traditional, old-world hierarchy. Everyone has a chance (given *laissez-faire* government) to maximize one's own worth (in America one is liberated to pursue one's aspirations without interference--that's what "liberalism" originally meant, and that is what Frederick Douglass wants at the end of his *Narrative*). But independence also leads to a sense of isolation (no traditional, supportive community; families on the move West, etc.). Without traditional context, insecurity about values arises, and thus, somewhat paradoxically, there emerges a continued preoccupation with what everyone else thinks. The average middle-class person aspires to be like everyone else. American Romantic writers like democracy and see the dignity of common folk, but also--usually only implicitly--are troubled by the loss of distinction. It is key to see that American Romantics can both celebrate the "common man" and their own, more spiritually/psychologically elite selves. Thus,

- 📖 Emerson worries in "The American Scholar" about imitation/parroting. He looks inward to find divine essence, which he claims we all share in common. So is he the ultimate democrat or a narcissist?
- 📖 Thoreau isolates/purifies himself at Walden pond.

- 📖 Poe habitually portrays aristocratic, hyper-sensitive madmen in gothic enclosures.
- 📖 Melville invests Ahab, a captain of a fishing boat, with a Homer-like or Shakespearean grandeur.
- 📖 Emily Dickinson does not go "public" by publishing her verse.
- 📖 Whitman embraces the democratic masses, yet calls his major poem "Song of Myself".

Conditions that influenced American Romanticism:

Frontier promised opportunity for expansion, growth, freedom; Europe lacked this element.
 Spirit of optimism invoked by the promise of an uncharted frontier.
 Immigration brought new cultures and perspectives
 Growth of industry in the north that further polarized the north and the agrarian south.
 Search for new spiritual roots.

Literary Themes:

Highly imaginative and subjective
 Emotional intensity
 Escapism
 Common man as hero
 Nature as refuge, source of knowledge and/or spirituality

Characteristics:

- Characters and setting set apart from society; characters were not of our own conscious kind
- Static characters--no development shown
- Characterization--work proves the characters are what the narrator has stated or shown
- Universe is mysterious; irrational; incomprehensible
- Gaps in causality
- Formal language
- Good receive justice; nature can also punish or reward
- Silences of the text--universals rather than learned truths
- Plot arranged around crisis moments; plot is important
- Plot demonstrates
 - romantic love
 - honor and integrity
 - idealism of self
- Supernatural foreshadowing (dreams, visions)
- Description provides a "feeling" of the scene

Sub Genre:

- Slave narrative: protest; struggle for authors self-realization/identity
- Domestic (sentimental): social visits; women secondary in their circumstances to men.
- Female gothic: devilish childhood; family doom; mysterious foundling; tyrannical father.
- Women's fiction: anti-sentimental
 - heroine begins poor and helpless
 - heroine succeeds on her own character
 - husbands less important than father

- Bildungsroman: initiation novel; growth from child to adult.

American Romanticists:

James Fenimore Cooper
 Emily Dickinson
 Frederick Douglass
 Ralph Waldo Emerson
 Margaret Fuller
 Nathaniel Hawthorne
 Washington Irving
 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
 Herman Melville
 Edgar Allen Poe
 Henry David Thoreau
 Walt Whitman

European Romanticists:

William Blake
 Lord Byron (George Gordon)
 Samuel Coleridge
 John Keats
 Ann Radcliffe
 Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley
 Percy Bysshe Shelley

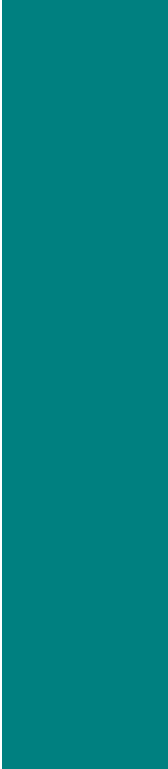
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American Romanticism : *Highlights*

Principles

Romanticism: Romantic Period in America 1828-1865.

1. Belief in natural goodness of man, that man in a state of nature would behave well but is hindered by civilization. The figure of the "Noble Savage" is an outgrowth of this idea.
2. Sincerity, spontaneity, and faith in emotion as markers of truth. (Doctrine of sensibility)
3. Belief that what is special in a man is to be valued over what is representative; delight in self-analysis.
4. Nature as a source of instruction, delight, and nourishment for the soul; return to nature as a source of inspiration and wisdom; celebration of man's connection with nature; life in nature often contrasted with the unnatural constraints of society.

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5. Affirmation of the values of democracy and the freedom of the individual. (Jacksonian Democracy)
 6. High value placed on finding connection with fresh, spontaneous in nature and self.
 7. Aspiration after the sublime and the wonderful, that which transcends mundane limits.
 8. In art, the sublime, the grotesque, the picturesque, and the beautiful with a touch of strangeness all were valued above the Neoclassical principles of order, proportion, and decorum. (Hudson River School of painters)
 9. Interest in the "antique": medieval tales and forms, ballads, Norse and Celtic mythology; the Gothic.
 10. Belief in perfectibility of man; spiritual force immanent not only in nature but in mind of man.
 11. Belief in organicism rather than Neoclassical rules; development of a unique form in each work.
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