



American Romanticism

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American Romanticism

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THE GREENHAVEN PRESS COMPANION TO
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American Romanticism

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FOREWORD

The study of literature most often involves focusing on an individual work and uncovering its themes, stylistic conventions, and historical relevance. It is also enlightening to examine multiple works by a single author, identifying similarities and differences among texts and tracing the author's development as an artist.

While the study of individual works and authors is instructive, however, examining groups of authors who shared certain cultural or historical experiences adds a further richness to the study of literature. By focusing on literary movements and genres, readers gain a greater appreciation of influence of historical events and social circumstances on the development of particular literary forms and themes. For example, in the early twentieth century, rapid technological and industrial advances, mass urban migration, World War I, and other events contributed to the emergence of a movement known as American modernism. The dramatic social changes, and the uncertainty they created, were reflected in an increased use of free verse in poetry, the stream-of-consciousness technique in fiction, and a general sense of historical discontinuity and crisis of faith in most of the literature of the era. By focusing on these commonalities, readers attain a more comprehensive picture of the complex interplay of social, economic, political, aesthetic, and philosophical forces and ideas that create the tenor of any era. In the nineteenth-century American romanticism movement, for example, authors shared many ideas concerning the preeminence of the self-reliant individual, the infusion of nature with spiritual significance, and the potential of persons to achieve transcendence via communion with nature. However, despite their commonalities, American romantics often differed significantly in their thematic and stylistic approaches. Walt Whitman celebrated the communal nature of America's open democratic society, while Ralph Waldo

Emerson expressed the need for individuals to pursue their own fulfillment regardless of their fellow citizens. Herman Melville wrote novels in a largely naturalistic style whereas Nathaniel Hawthorne's novels were gothic and allegorical.

Another valuable reason to investigate literary movements and genres lies in their potential to clarify the process of literary evolution. By examining groups of authors, literary trends across time become evident. The reader learns, for instance, how English romanticism was transformed as it crossed the Atlantic to America. The poetry of Lord Byron, William Wordsworth, and John Keats celebrated the restorative potential of rural scenes. The American romantics, writing later in the century, shared their English counterparts' faith in nature; but American authors were more likely to present an ambiguous view of nature as a source of liberation as well as the dwelling place of personal demons. The whale in Melville's *Moby-Dick* and the forests in Hawthorne's novels and stories bear little resemblance to the benign pastoral scenes in Wordsworth's lyric poems.

Each volume in Greenhaven Press's Great Literary Movements and Genres series begins with an introductory essay that places the topic in a historical and literary context. The essays that follow are carefully chosen and edited for ease of comprehension. These essays are arranged into clearly defined chapters that are outlined in a concise annotated table of contents. Finally, a thorough chronology maps out crucial literary milestones of the movement or genre as well as significant social and historical events. Readers will benefit from the structure and coherence that these features lend to material that is often challenging. With Greenhaven's Great Literary Movements and Genres in hand, readers will be better able to comprehend and appreciate the major literary works and their impact on society.

INTRODUCTION

In 1941, literary critic F.O. Matthiessen introduced the term “American Renaissance” to refer to the literary ferment taking place in the United States between the late 1830s and the beginning of the Civil War in 1861. The period culminated in the 1850s, when some of the greatest books of all time—Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, and Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*—appeared on the heels of one another. While Matthiessen’s term reflects the spirit of the movement, American Romanticism was not technically a renaissance, but a nascence—a birth. The American Romantics were the first to establish a literary tradition that expressed the unique character of America. They recognized the inadequacy of European modes of expression to capture the expanding, constantly shifting landscape of America—a landscape that was simultaneously wild and urban, rough-hewn and refined.

The genesis of the movement is difficult to pinpoint. However, the American Romantics were undoubtedly influenced by the dramatic political and social changes taking place in the early nineteenth century. Andrew Jackson, president from 1829–1837, posed a challenge to the aristocracy with his belief in a democratic, egalitarian society. The philosophy of manifest destiny was causing the country—which was already sprawling and heterogeneous—to expand westward at a rapid rate. A different type of growth was occurring in the North, as industrialization transformed small towns into urban centers. At the same time, conflict over slavery was creating a serious rift between the South and the North.

The Romantics had disparate reactions to the changes taking place in America. On the surface, American Romanticism’s most prominent writers—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe,

Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman—appear to be more dissimilar than alike. Attempts to unify the group by applying the characteristics commonly associated with Romanticism are often fruitless. For example, if Romanticism is defined as idealism, Hawthorne and Melville, who were more pessimistic, do not fit in. Alternatively, if Romanticism is viewed as an expression of nationalism, one would have to exclude Poe, whose writing contains no details that are distinctly American. Furthermore, the writers of this period did not adhere to any one form, instead experimenting in novels (often referred to as “romances”), short stories, tales, essays, journals, poetry, and travelogues.

Although the American Romantics adopted a variety of styles and themes, they were unified by a concern with the internal world—the world of the mind. The American Romantics were less interested in how people related to each other than they were with people as individuals. In a society that was complex and inconstant, the Romantics turned inward for a source of truth, examining questions of human identity, imagination, and intuition. Some writers, such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, regarded the individual with optimism and confidence. Other Romantics, Hawthorne and Melville, for example, explored the individual’s isolation from society by providing complex psychological portraits of their protagonists.

The instability of American society also inspired the Romantic faith in nature. For the American Romantics, nature was a place of beauty, simplicity, and truth. The Romantics revered nature for its own sake, but also looked to nature as a metaphor for the human experience.

Themes of individualism and nature are among the many aspects of American Romanticism examined in *American Romanticism: Great Literary Movements*, an anthology of essays written by some of the most well-known critics of American Romanticism. It is the editor’s hope that this anthology will assist the reader in understanding the work that emerged during this exceptional period in the history of American literature.

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF AMERICAN ROMANTICISM

According to literary folklore, the movement known as American Romanticism can be traced back to a specific date, 'August 31, 1837, when Ralph Waldo Emerson addressed the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard College. In his speech, called "The American Scholar," Emerson entreated the writers of America to establish their literary independence from Europe. He announced

Perhaps the time is already come . . . when the sluggish 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.'

These words have become known as the herald of a dazzling spell of creative energy that produced some of the most esteemed works of all time: Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, the essays of Emerson, and the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe. The literature of American Romanticism, written between the late 1830s and the onset of the Civil War in 1861, is considered the first illustration of American literary genius.

The previous generation of writers, who had been born immediately after the revolution—namely, Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and William Cullen Bryant—had attempted to represent the American experience, but were constrained by their adherence to European literary models. As Larzer Ziff, author of *Literary Democracy*, contends, "A good deal of what [Irving, Cooper, and Bryant] observed in their society failed to register in their writing be-

cause they had no precedent for regarding it worthy of being presented.”² The American Romantics established that precedent. For the first time in history, the literature of America was not written to fit into the tradition of other countries; instead, it created a tradition of its own.

This is not to say that American Romanticism was not influenced by the literature of other countries. In fact, the American Romantics borrowed liberally from the forms exhibited in Europe—particularly England—during the early nineteenth century. One such form was the Gothic novel, which dominated British literature during the late 1700s and early 1800s, reaching its pinnacle in 1818 with the publication of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Drawing on images of graveyards, dark forests, and monasteries, the Gothic novel explored the supernatural and grotesque. Some of the Gothic writers, such as Mary Shelley, were also part of the Romantic movement that was beginning to flourish in England. Initially developed in Europe during the 1700s, the philosophy of Romanticism favored nature over the city, the individual over society, and emotion over rationality. Romanticism was embraced by the most famous nineteenth century British poets: William Blake, Lord Byron, William Wordsworth, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. However, the prominent British novelists of that era, such as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and Anthony Trollope, employed Romantic elements in their work, but were more interested in creating realistic representations of society through the use of abundant detail.

American Romantics combined elements of Gothic literature, Romanticism, and the British novel to create a new form: the American romance. The intent of the American romance was to examine the intersection between fantasy and reality. In his introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, titled “The Custom House,” Hawthorne describes the domain of romance as “somewhere between the real world and fairyland, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other.”³

Although the events it portrays are often realistic, a romance is intended to be read primarily on a figurative level. Melville, Hawthorne, and Poe often constructed their figurative representations through the use of allegory and symbolism. Hawthorne’s narrative, “The Birth-mark,” illustrates how Romantic writers employed allegory and symbolism in their fiction. Over the course of the story, the protagonist,

Aylmer, grows increasingly repulsed by a small red birthmark on his wife Georgiana's cheek—which he feels is the only thing marring her perfect beauty. Repulsed to the point of obsession, Aylmer concocts a potion that he hopes will eliminate the birthmark. His potion does cause the birthmark to evaporate, but it also kills Georgiana.

Viewed allegorically, Aylmer's failed attempt at removing Georgiana's birthmark—a symbol of human imperfection—represents the futility of seeking spiritual perfection in the material world. As professor Deborah L. Madsen writes, “[Aylmer attempts] to remove the single sign of his wife's earthly mortality: the birth-mark which stands as her ‘visible mark of earthly imperfection.’ . . . Aylmer becomes obsessed with the scientific redemption of fallen nature which he hopes to achieve by perfecting his wife's beauty. He misguidedly seeks a spiritual absolute in the form of a literal reality.”⁴

ORGANIC STYLE

While American fiction writers were using allegory and symbolism to create romances, American poets of the era were attempting to draw a connection between art and nature. Influenced by British Romantic Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who asserted that a poem should aspire to the wholeness of a living thing, Emerson developed the theory of organic style. Organic style was a manifestation of organicism—the Romantic view that everything in the world is alive and interrelated. As Emerson writes, “[I]t is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing.”⁵

Whitman took this belief even one step further by completely discarding meter, rhyme schemes, and traditional forms. In doing so, he broke from a literary tradition that had guided poetry for centuries. No one knows exactly what prompted Whitman to invent free verse. Some speculate that he was inspired by the Bible's Psalms, while others claim that his themes of liberty, individualism, and optimism demanded a new, freer form. Regardless, Whitman's work changed the character of poetry in America and in the world. His invention of free verse is considered by many to be the single most important innovation in poetry.

THE RISE OF DEMOCRATIC THOUGHT

While American Romanticism created new styles, it is known more for its development of ideas. In general, the movement can be characterized by four main tenets: nationalistic pride, optimism, a love of nature, and a belief in the superiority of the individual. These themes were influenced in part by the political and social forces guiding the country during the early to mid-nineteenth century.

Politically, the most significant factor of the time was the rise of what was referred to as Jacksonian democracy. Although Americans typically view democracy as an integral part of the nation's history, the concept of democracy as it is known today did not appear until the first quarter of the nineteenth century. In fact, for those who controlled the country's wealth and power in the early 1800s, the word "democracy" did not connote freedom and justice, but anarchy. Therefore, when Andrew Jackson, a devoted Democrat, emerged as a presidential candidate in 1822, the aristocratic class regarded him with contempt. The general public, on the other hand, saw Jackson as an ideal leader. Literary historians Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, and R.W.B. Lewis describe him as

a man of common origins but master of an elegant estate and of a high manner when occasion demanded, a man of hardihood, a duelist, a connoisseur of horseflesh, a breeder of fighting cocks, a soldier with a natural air of command, unimpeachable courage, and iron endurance, the hero of the Battle of New Orleans, a politician of pungent vocabulary, ruthless logic, and ferocious partisanship.⁶

With his charisma, strength, and willingness to rebel against tradition, Jackson had great popular appeal. In the 1828 election against John Quincy Adams, Jackson won every electoral vote except for those from New England. The triumph of a "common man" such as Jackson over the blue-blooded Adams was seen as a challenge to the aristocracy and the beginning of an egalitarian society.

Although the Romantic writers were not direct supporters of Jackson—only Hawthorne was a Democrat—the Romantic movement was influenced by the rise of democratic thought. By the time Jackson was president, the Fourth of July was the most popular holiday, and the country was experiencing a wave of nationalistic pride. American Romanticism reflected the optimism of a young, expanding country whose possibili-