

## American Romanticism

Generally speaking, American romanticism spanned the period between the Jacksonian Era and the end of the Civil War, 1830-1865. The United States was undergoing dramatic transformations during this period—cultural, political, economic, and industrial changes that would ultimately lead to the explosive ruptures of a civil war. In literature, these decades are considered by many to comprise America’s first great creative period. Many of the writers coming to the fore during this time helped to set the stage—and define the terms—for what would become a true “American” literature (as opposed to something borrowed and recycled from England or Europe). Literary critic F. O. Matthiessen (in 1941) famously referred to this era as the American Renaissance. This flowering of literary activity was made up of a wide variety of writers. Some who began their art during the “Federalist Age”—e.g., Washington Irving, William Cullen Bryant, and James Fenimore Cooper—went on to define what we now know as American romanticism. Those authors emerging later include novelists Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Gilmore Simms, Herman Melville, Harriet Beecher Stowe; poets Edgar Allan Poe, John Greenleaf Whittier, James Russell Lowell, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson; and essayists Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Oliver Wendell Holmes (with many working in multiple genres). Although this varied collection of writers worked under the banners of diverse creative philosophies—Transcendentalism, historical romance, the gothic, sentimental fiction—one can see many similar traits and assumptions among its practitioners.

This renaissance in American literature resulted from, among other things:

- dramatic increases in literacy and education
- the growth of the publishing industry and the emergence of larger publishing houses (including books, periodicals, gift books, almanacs, and annuals)
- the emerging significance of the domestic fiction market
- a stronger sense of nationhood, in many ways brought about by:
  - the growth of larger newspapers, spanning larger regions
  - the ongoing expansion into the west, a sense of Manifest Destiny
  - a powerful emphasis on reform and humanitarianism...in both the North as well as in the South (e.g., growing attention to abolition and women’s rights)
- a ongoing shift from Jeffersonian agrarianism to an emphasis on business and technology (the word “technology” was coined in 1829)

In a **very** general sense, some of the features defining American romanticism include:

- a faith in the value of individualism and the legitimacy of intuitive perception
- a sense that the natural world is a source of goodness and a check against human corruption; an emphasis on the innocence of nature; the glorification of the “noble savage”; a desire to escape from the constraints of society

- a rejection of rationalism and the philosophies that made up the Age of Reason; a championing of feeling over reason; an emphasis of individual free expression over the constraints of law and custom
- a revolt against traditional art forms characterized by strict limits (i.e., neoclassicism)
- an intense questioning of materialism and the material world (this is especially the case with Transcendental thinkers)
- an interest in the psychic states of expression and understanding, manifesting itself in the gothic, the supernatural, the mystery, and the kind of “moonlight” inspiration articulated Hawthorne’s “Custom House”—in other words, there is an emphasis on fantastic depictions of “reality”
- a heavy use of symbolism or allegory that in many cases would be atemporal, and take place in geographically unidentified regions
- for some writers (such as Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe), an ambiguous positioning that refuses any easy answers to cultural or aesthetic problems. This sense of *romantic irony* is characterized by:
  - a holding out for alternate or antithetical possibilities of meaning (sustained by a heavy emphasis on symbolism), without clearly supporting any particular possibility of meaning
  - a self-conscious, even metafictional, sense of the art being created, as well as an accompanying critique of that art
  - an awareness that he does not expect his “arguments” to be taken seriously, especially in the “rational” sense—and does not wish it to be
  - consciousness of the comic implications of his own seriousness
- sometimes an emphasis on the irrational, even perverse, side of existence, suggesting that there is more going on underneath the seeming ordered surface of reality—that unnatural impulses or nightmarish terrors are what really underlie “civilization.”
- “patriotic” attention paid to the American landscape, celebrating dense forests, meadows, glades, prairies, streams, and even the vast oceans surrounding the continent
- an enthusiastic sense (for some) that adherence to such beliefs can lead to moral growth