

## American Renaissance

The American Renaissance in literature is actually a very specific part of the larger literary period, the American Romantic period. The Romantic period, which lasted roughly from 1800-1860, experienced an explosion of uniquely American literature near the end of the time period. This surge of American literary masterpieces from 1840-1860 is known as the **American Renaissance**.

During the American Renaissance, writers could generally be placed into one of two **subgenres**, or categories: **the Dark Romantics** and the **Transcendentalists**.



*Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville were key Dark Romantic writers*

To begin, it's best to explain that Dark Romantic doesn't mean darkly romantic, so we're NOT thinking of a *50 Shades of Grey* type-thing (I'm sorry to disappoint you) - though both are exploring the inner workings of the mind. Instead, we are talking about a subgenre of writing that took a shadowy approach to the fantastical.

The Romantic writers took an optimistic approach to the mystical aspects of the universe where sins are properly punished and those who are truly good are rewarded. For example, in Washington Irving's 'The Devil and Tom Walker,' Tom Walker is punished for his greed. It's a moral tale to warn against hypocrisy and evil. On the other hand, the Dark Romantics, like **Edgar Allan Poe**, **Nathaniel Hawthorne**, and **Herman Melville**, sometimes called Gothic, were more serious and found the darkness and evil in those same aspects, with evil taking over the good. As a result, their writing typically has the following characteristics:

1. Lots of creepy symbols
2. Horrific themes
3. Psychological effects of guilt and sin

## Symbols

A **symbol** is something that represents something else. A red rose, for example, is a common symbol for love, romance, passion, and vitality. But if we change the color of the rose to black, it becomes a symbol of something more sinister - death, loss, and possibly evil. Authors use symbols

to help readers make connections beyond the story itself. Sometimes objects in a story are symbols. Sometimes characters are symbols.

Most people are familiar with Edgar Allan Poe's poem 'The Raven,' which is a Dark Romantic piece of writing that is still popular today (even the *The Simpsons* have their own version). In that poem, the *raven* is a symbol for death and hopelessness as it sits and watches the narrator, who is slowly going mad. Poe could have chosen any bird, but he chose a bird who is known for hanging out at battlefields and picking away at the dead. These connections through the use of symbols are intentionally made by the author and **reinforce** the overall meaning of the story. For the Dark Romantics, sin and evil were everywhere, so their symbols often represent evil entities, like devils or spirits. These symbols often reinforce one of many horrific themes found in the story.



*The Dark Romantics used evil beings as symbols for sin*

## Horrific Themes

A story's **theme** is a statement that the text seems to be making about the subject and for the Dark Romantics, this statement was drenched in terrifying ideas. In some cases, they studied **the struggles of human nature**. More specifically, they believed that human nature was less than good, so evil was able to take hold of a person. Like the Puritans before them, they believed evil and sin were everywhere, but it was not as easy to identify, so it could easily lead to self-destruction.

It was not just human nature that harbored evil, though; the Dark Romantics also saw darkness in the external world. The idea that our **surroundings could be filled with evil** fueled much of their writing, encouraging readers to question everything around them. **Edgar Allan Poe**, a famous Dark Romantic writer, encompasses this theme in his short story 'The Fall of the House of Usher.' As despair takes over the home, it deteriorates and finally collapses.

Of course, like many stories, the Dark Romantics knew that good was always battling evil, but unlike your typical super-hero movie, evil usually won out. But it wasn't simply the presence of evil that fueled the Dark Romantics' writing. They wanted to explore the **horrors of evil** that were lurking in everyone. This meant that they spent a good deal of time looking at the character's thought processes. It's not enough to see the character's actions; we need to see his or her reasons for committing those actions in the first place. Poe wrote another story called 'The Tell-Tale Heart' that follows a murderer's increased paranoia after hiding a dismembered body under the floorboards.

If you put all of these components together, you end up with more than your run-of-the-mill horror story. These stories are more like the movies *Black Swan* and *American Psycho* that follow the

stream of consciousness deterioration of the mind than say, *Scream* and *Saw* which focus on actions. These writers want to know 'why' rather than 'how', so they focus on the **psychological**, or how the mind works.



*The Scarlet Letter* focuses on the **psychological repercussions of sin and guilt**

## Psychological Effects of Guilt And Sin

With all these horrific undertones and creepy symbols, it shouldn't be a surprise then that the characters in these stories are not your average storybook heroes. Mostly, though not always, Dark Romantic writers want to explore the **psychological effects of guilt and sin**, so we see characters who are harboring guilt for their sins, and that guilt leads to the grotesque, the fantastic, or the morbid. In other words, these characters are often deranged or go mad. It also means that the reader is often stuck in the character's mind, watching as it slowly deteriorates into that madness. Nathaniel Hawthorne illustrates this concept in his novel *The Scarlet Letter*. He tells the story of a minister whose affair with a married woman sends him into a guilt-ridden self-punishment, and ultimately death.

## Lesson Summary

So, to sum up, the **American Romantic** period had an explosion of uniquely American literature at the end of the era, from about 1840-1860. During this time, the subgenre of Dark Romantic writers, including **Edgar Allan Poe** and **Nathaniel Hawthorne**, used creepy symbols and horrific themes to look at the inner-workings of the mind and to explore the psychological effects of guilt and sin. The result is a collection of short stories, poems, and novels that forced Americans to see that evil was lurking in us all.