

# American Romanticism



1870



# Important Historical Background



- Period of rapid growth: Louisiana Purchase, nationalism, and self-awareness.
- War of 1812
- Mexican-American War (1846-1848) – Texas comes in as a slave state
- Rapid Growth in transportation—canals, roads, railroad
- Industrial growth—telegraph, steel plow, reaper
- Conflicts arise from growth: women's rights, abolitionism, child labor laws.

# Romanticism



- Romanticism is the name given to those schools of thought that value feeling and intuition over reason.
- Romantics believed that the imagination was able to discover truths that the rational mind could not reach.
- Usually accompanied by powerful emotion and associated with natural, unspoiled beauty.
- Imagination, individual feelings, and wild nature were of greater value than reason, logic, and cultivation.

# Romanticism



- Romantic writers placed a new emphasis on intuitive, “felt” experience and often contrasted poetry with science, which they saw as destroying the very truth it claimed to seek.
- The romantics wanted to rise above “dull realities” to a realm of higher truth and searched for exotic settings in the more “natural” past or in a world far removed from the grimy and noisy industrial age.
- Romantic writers tried to reflect on the natural world until dull reality fell away to reveal underlying beauty and truth.

# Characteristics of American Romanticism



- Values feeling and intuition over reason.
- Place faith in inner experience and the power of imagination.
- Shuns the artificiality of civilization and seeks unspoiled nature.
- Prefers youthful innocence to educated sophistication.
- Champions individual freedom and the worth of the individual.
- Reflects on nature's beauty as a path to spiritual and moral development.
- Looks backward to the wisdom of the past and distrusts progress.
- Finds beauty and truth in exotic locales, the supernatural realm and the inner world of the imagination.
- Sees poetry as the highest expression of imagination.
- Finds inspiration in myth, legend, and folklore.

# The Romantic Hero



- The romantic hero was one of the most important products of the early American novel.
- The rational hero, like Ben Franklin, was worldly, educated, sophisticated, and bent on making a place for himself in civilization.
- The typical hero in American Romantic fiction was youthful, innocent, intuitive, and close to nature.

# Characteristics of the American Romantic Hero



- Young or possesses youthful qualities.
- Innocent and pure of purpose.
- Has a sense of honor based not on society's rules but on some higher principle.
- Has a knowledge of people and life based on deep, intuitive understanding, not on formal learning.
- Loves nature and avoids town life.
- Quests for some higher truth in the natural world.

# Romantic Techniques



- Remoteness of setting in time and place.
- Improbable plots.
- Unlikely characterization.
- Informal writing style.
- Experiments in new forms.
- Individualized form of writing.



# American Romantic Writers



- Washington Irving
- James Fenimore Cooper
- William Cullen Bryant(fp) fireside poet
- Jon Greenleaf Whittier(fp)
- Oliver Wendell Holmes(fp)
- James Russell Lowell(fp)
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow(fp)
- Ralph Waldo Emerson
- Henry David Thoreau
- Nathaniel Hawthorne
- Edgar Allan Poe
- Herman Melville

# James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851)



- Born on September 15, 1789 in Burlington, New Jersey
- In 1823, Cooper published *The Pioneers* which eventually consisted of five books about Natty Bumppo called *The Leatherstocking Tales*. With this, he created what can be critically viewed as the first **American novel** and the first **American hero**.
- Noted works: *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The History of the Navy of the United States of America* and *The Cruise of Sommers*.

# Washington Irving (1793-1859)



- Father of American Literature
- First American writer to gain European respect.
- Best-known for his short stories and caricatures that celebrate America's past.
- His characters are humorously drawn stereotypes that represent American traits.
- Stories set in quaint American villages (generally in New York's Hudson River area).
- His plots convey conventional morals.
- Works include "The Devil and Tom Walker," "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," and "Rip Van Winkle."

# The Fireside Poets



- The fireside poets (also called the “schoolroom” or “household” poets) were the first group of American poets to rival British poets in popularity in either country. Today their verse may seem more Victorian in sensibility than romantic, perhaps overly sentimental or moralizing in tone, but as a group they are notable for their scholarship, political sensibilities, and the resilience of their lines and themes. (poetry.org)

# Henry Wadsworth Longfellow



- Father of American poetry and a member of the Fireside Poets.
- Traditionally formatted, sentimental, optimistic lyrics give a romanticized version of America's early history.
- Works include "Hiawatha," "The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls," and "Paul Revere's ride."

# Ralph Waldo Emerson & Henry David Thoreau



- Ralph Waldo Emerson
- Born May 25, 1803, in Boston, Massachusetts
- In 1832 Emerson traveled to Europe, where he met with literary figures Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth.
- Emerson became known as the central figure of his literary and philosophical group, now known as the American Transcendentalists.
- Noted works: “Self Reliance” and “American Scholar”

# Ralph Waldo Emerson & Henry David Thoreau



- Henry David Thoreau
- Born on 12 July 1817 in Concord, Massachusetts
- writer, poet, essayist, philosopher as well as a naturalist.
- From 1841 to 1843, Thoreau lived in the Emerson household where he assisted Emerson in editing and contributed poetry and prose to Emerson's magazine, The Dial.
- In 1845, Thoreau built a small house near the shores of Walden Pond and spent the next two years in solitude working his writing.
- Noted works: "Civil Disobedience," "Walden, Or Life in the Woods," and "A Yankee in Canada."

# Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)



- Born on 4 July 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts
- Friends and neighbors with other notable writers including Amos Bronson Alcott and his daughter Louisa May Alcott, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson
- His ancestors were some of the first Puritans to settle in the New England area and the lingering guilt Hawthorne felt from his great grandfather having officiated during the Salem Witch Trials provided a theme for many of his stories including *The House of Seven Gables*.
- Noted works: *The House of Seven Gables*, *The Scarlet Letter*, dozens of short stories and essays.



# Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)



- Father of the American detective story.
- As famous for his trouble life as his literature.
- Defined the short story as we know it today, as well as the psychological thriller.
- Poetry reflects his belief in the power of sound and the impact of the death of a beautiful woman.
- Stories are not typically American, in that they don't highlight American characters or settings.
- Works include "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Telltale Heart," and "The Raven."

# Herman Melville (1819-1891)



- August 1, 1819 in New York, New York
- As a young man joined a merchant ship sailing from New York to Liverpool, England this trip would inspire and inform much of his literary work including *Redburn: His First Voyage*, a highly romanticized version of his own experiences.
- Noted works: *Moby-Dick* (considered a literary masterpiece), *Billy Budd*, as well assorted short stories.