

## *AMERICAN ROMANTICISM: INTRODUCTION*



“The heart,  
like the mind, has  
a memory.  
And in it are kept  
the most precious  
keepsakes.”

HENRY WADSWORTH  
LONGFELLOW

1807–1882

## *ROMANTICISM: THE MOVEMENT*

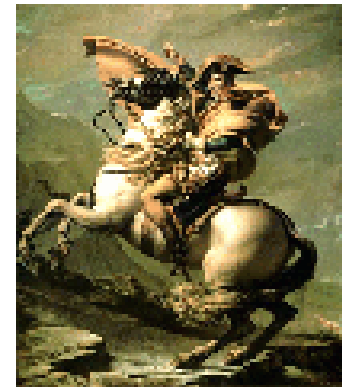
- Romanticism dominated cultural thought from the last decade of the 18th century well into the first decades of the 20th century
- First appearance in Germany in the 1770s (“Sturm und Drang”); flowering in England in the 1790s; importation to America from the 1820s onward
- To a large degree, Romanticism was a reaction against the Enlightenment or Age of Reason, especially its emphasis on formal propriety, classical style, and decorum

## In America, it was also called “The American Renaissance”

- The great writers of this period, roughly 1840-1865 although more particularly 1850-1855, marked the first maturing of American letters. It was a Renaissance in the sense of a flowering, excitement over human possibilities, and a high regard for individual ego. It was definitely and even defiantly American, as these writers struggled to understand what "American" could possibly mean, especially in terms of a literature which was distinctively American and not British. Their inability to resolve this struggle - it was even more a **personal** one than a nationalistic one, for it questioned their **identity and place** in society - did much to fire them creatively.

# ROMANTICISM: THE MOVEMENT

The Enlightenment faith in a perfectible material and spiritual universe through the power of **human reason** was shaken by the revolutions that ended the century. This included The American Revolution, The French Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars. Some Romantic artists actually—for a while—exalted Napoleon as the ultimate Romantic hero—e.g., Beethoven in his “Eroica Symphony,” (which later was used in Hitchcock’s *Psycho*...)



# *ROMANTICISM: THE MOVEMENT*

- Question: What comes to mind or what do you associate with the term “Romanticism”?

## *ROMANTICISM: THE MOVEMENT*

- Although we usually associate a quaint or exaggerated effusion of emotion with Romanticism (hence, the shift in meaning of the word “Romantic” to everything relating love...), the Romantic age brought about concepts of the individual and his/her relationship to the world/society that we still largely subscribe to and even champion today.

# An incredible flowering of masterpieces

The glory years were 1850-1855. There was an incredible flowering of masterpieces in this era: Emerson's *Representative Men*, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of Seven Gables*, Melville's *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, Thoreau's *Walden*, and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

Aesthetically, the romantics were in a state of revolt primarily against the restraints of classicism and formalism. **Form**, particularly traditional literary forms, mattered much less than **inspiration**, **enthusiasm**, and **emotion**. Good literature should have heart, not rules (although it is never so simple as that.)

# A rejection of repressive spirituality

Religion, always a basic concern for Americans, was ready for romanticism and its kind of pantheistic religion. The stern dogmas of Calvinism (which gave us Puritanism and witch hunts) had been replaced by rationalistic Unitarianism. However, the Unitarians were so rational and so determined to avoid the emotional excesses of the Evangelical movement (the Great Awakening, etc) that they seemed dry and cold, unable to satisfy **deep spiritual yearnings**. People, especially Emerson, were looking for new spiritual roots, **personally involving and meaningful**, but not traditional.



# *ROMANTICISM: THE MOVEMENT*

- Romanticism is the cult of the individual - the cultural and psychological birth of the I - the Self.
- Belief in an inner spark of divinity that links one human being to another and all human beings to the larger “Truth”
- In poetry, visual art, and music, artists became increasingly preoccupied with articulating the personal experience that becomes, in turn, a representative one
- IMAGINATION becomes the source of artistic vision/creativity (during the neo-classical age, imagination was linked to “fancy,” which implied the fantastic, fictive, and even false)

## *ROMANTICISM: THE MOVEMENT*

- The artist (especially the poet) takes on quasi-religious status not only as prophet but as moral leader
- The poet/artist is a divinely inspired vehicle through which Nature and the common man find their voices

# ROMANTICISM: THE MOVEMENT

One of the defining aspects of Romanticism was **concern for the common man**. This came from both the democratic changes of the age of revolution, as well as an interest in folk culture.

These romantics confronted the distinctively American pressures for **conformity** and **definitions of success** in terms of money. They spoke out, to some degree, against slavery, promoting the ideals of Jacksonian democracy, that "any man can do anything" (the unspoken part of this was *if he's white and educated*). They sought to create a distinctive American literary voice; it was time for the cultural revolution to follow the political one. They felt compelled to declare cultural and individual independence from Europe, even though they had little idea of what form that could take.

# ROMANTICISM: THE MOVEMENT

- Aesthetic changes: individuality translated into the revolution of *feeling* against *form*
- Poets, painters, and musicians were no longer trying to make their expression fit conventional forms, but carving out new forms to capture their feelings and thoughts
- The emphasis on the language of the *soul*

# *ROMANTICISM: THE MOVEMENT*

- For the Romantic, nature was a constant companion and teacher--both benign and tyrannical
- Nature became
  - the stage on which the human drama was played
  - the context in which man came to understand his place in the universe
  - the transforming agent which harmonized the individual soul with what the Transcendentalists would call the Over-Soul.

# ROMANTICISM: THE MOVEMENT

- Romantic figures include: the hero, the wanderer, and the genius:
  - all journey to new lands (literally and figuratively), defy limitations, and overcome obstacles
  - Hero/wanderer fascination also came from the European Romantic identification and exploration of everything Medieval (the Middle Ages were thought to be characterized by mystery and irrationality)
- Typical Romantic motifs:
  - Exotic lands (Melville, especially his South Sea novels and *Moby Dick*)
  - Amorphous world of dreams (Coleridge, “Kubla Khan”)
  - Dark terrors of the psyche (E. A. Poe!)
  - Dizzying heights—in both nature and human creativity (*Frankenstein...*)
  - Sublime vistas in nature reflecting the divine and potentially terrifying powers of the human mind, spirit, and soul

# *AMERICAN ROMANTICISM*

- Often associated with the terms “American Renaissance” and “Transcendentalism”
- Poets: William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson
- Prose Writers: Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Herman Melville.

## *AMERICAN ROMANTICISM: THE POETRY*

- William Cullen Bryant, “To a Waterfowl” and “The Prairies”
- Lydia Howard Huntley Sigourney, “Niagara”
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “A Psalm of Life” and “The Fire of Drift-wood”