

AMERICAN ROMANTICISM

Romanticism I: intro, early US mythology and folklore

Romanticism is defined by several distinctive features such as:

- 1) Revolt against the Age of Reason
- 2) Romantic individualism
- 3) Shaping national identities

The **revolt against the Age of Reason** (i.e. Neoclassicist and Enlightenment worldview) is most explicitly expressed by later generations of Romanticists.

Revolt against the Age of Reason can be exemplified e.g. by:

- Nature over city
- Intuition over reason (intuition should complement reason)
- Individuality vs collective interest
- Criticism of tabula rasa (Nature over nurture)

Romantic individualism

Can be seen as a development from the Enlightenment notion of individual rights formulated in the US Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789).

Romantic understanding of an individual goes beyond this. It celebrates human individuality as a vital quality, often in contrast to the existing communal values.

Examples of individualistic characters in US Romanticist literature:

- The **solitary pioneer** of the West (Natty Bumppo in *The Leatherstocking Tales* by James F. Cooper)
- A **defiant social outcast** (Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne)
- A **deviant from social norms** (various eccentric characters found in stories by E.A.Poe)

Romanticism also helped **shape national mythologies**. The argument can be described as follows:

- 1) Much like every individual is a distinct personality, every nation (possibly an ethnic group) should be seen as unique.
- 2) National mythologies and folklore is where the soul of the nation dwells. - This helps explain the Romanticist preference for historical topics.

Foundational national mythology therefore legitimizes one's claim on nationhood or statehood. (e.g. Europe in 1848)



In some countries there was a desperate search for a foundational literary artifact which would support the legitimacy of an aspiring new nation.

In the early 19th century United States, the nationalistic elements of Romanticism took for example the following shapes:

- 1) Recognizably American folklore
- 2) Distinctly American mythological genre (a western) and its main hero (the frontiersman)
- 3) Abolitionism of slavery (European equivalent = e.g. Byron's effort to help free Greece from the yoke of the Ottoman Empire)

Washington Irving (1783 – 1859)

- the best example of an author of distinctly American legendry and folklore (though often adapted from foreign sources)

He recreated the raw US history by "humanizing the [American] land [and] endowing it with a [...] a set of legends". By doing this, he helped "build the new nation's soul" (VanSpanckeren, 23)

Like many early Romanticists, he often wrote about memorable events of the past.

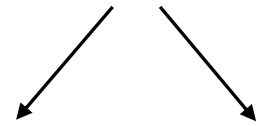
He often writes about the Dutch community in the New York City area.

This reflects his fascination with the culturally distinct community.

→ His earliest work, a satirical History of New York, written under a Dutch pseudonym Diedrich Knickerbocker, features the earliest version of Santa Claus (adapted from Dutch folklore)

Major work:

Sketchbook of Geoffrye Crayon (1820)



The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow (class reading)

Rip Van Winkle

Rip Van Winkle is a farmer who wanders into the Catskill Mountains. He meets there a group of dwarfs playing nine pipes. Rip helps a dwarf and is rewarded with a draught of liquor. He falls into an enchanted sleep. When he awakens, 20 years later, the world has changed. He is an old man with a long, white beard. Rip goes into town and finds everything changed. His wife is dead, his children are grown. The old man entertains the people with tales of the old days and his encounter with the dwarfs.

Q: Does this sound like Irving's original tale?

James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851)

The father of the American Western.

He also writes about American history, but for a different reason: nostalgia for the old pioneer values and the pristine nature.

This is embodied in the character of Natty Bumppo in his *Leatherstocking Tales* (a pentalogy of five novels).

Natty Bumppo is modeled on Daniel Boone, an American scout and a mediating figure between the advancing white settlers and the Native Americans.

He may be seen as a tragic and also ironic character. **Why? How is his situation dilemmatic and tragic?**

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Historical background:

The American readership preferred books by well-established writers from Europe.

No copyright: Pirating European and American books was fairly common. As a result of this, many early American Romanticist authors lived (and died) in relative poverty.

Edgar Allan Poe (1809 –1849) influenced many subsequent authors and created or perfected **new genres:**

Detective story
Murders in Rue Morgue – featuring Mr. Dupin, a genius amateur detective who is smarter than the police.

Mystery, horror and thriller stories (see the reading assignments)

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Science fiction
- a hot air balloon flight to the Moon,
- a cyborg-like character (“The Man That Was Used Up”)
- far fetched scientific experiments (“Some Words With a Mummy”)
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Fantasy literature
- *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*

Original **poetry** (Alone, The Raven, etc.)

<i>The Pioneers</i>	written in 1823	Natty Bumppo as an old man
<i>The Last of the Mohicans</i>	1826	Set in 1757; Natty as man in his prime (v nejlepší věku)
<i>The Prairie</i>	1827	Natty as an old man
<i>The Pathfinder</i>	1840	Set in 1759; Natty as man in his prime
<i>The Deerslayer</i>	1841	Natty as a young man

The story of *The Last of the Mohicans* evolves against the background of the Seven Years’ War in the North America.

On the other hand , these pirated English books also fed the imagination of the younger writers. They in fact helped “train“ the 2nd generation of American Romanticists (Poe, Hawthorne etc.)

These are defined by individualism and mistrust towards the Age of Reason.

Criticism of tabula rasa:
Romanticists generally did not believe in acquired morality.

Typical features of his work:

- Unreliable narrators
- Twisted psychology and motivation (see the reading assignments)
- The character of the brooding outsider (see the poem Alone)

Recurrent themes:

- Death of a young beauty (a classic Romanticist contrast)
- Premature burial
- Mental illness and compulsive behavior

Cooper uses history in a similar way Walter Scott does.

Natty Bumppo is somewhat like Ivanhoe: the chivalric knight of the American West.

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Unfortunately, these old values are vanishing and so is the pristine American wilderness.

This conviction was shared by the dark romanticists (the American Gothic) and by most of the positive romanticists.

American Gothic

The basic element of the gothic genre is the element of awe.

How can a European / American Gothic writer induce awe?

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In effect, both Irving and Cooper helped shape early American mythologies, be it folklore and legendry (Irving), or the western and frontier tale (Cooper)

Charles Brockden Brown (1771 –1810) can be seen as a Gothic predecessor of Poe.

Author of the first novel in the USA –**Wieland** (1799).

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1861)

Author of romances - dark novels and novellas which are not openly didactic but may often have a moral overtone.

A typical example:

Romanticism II: American Gothic

Historical background

Political independence from Britain did not immediately bring cultural independence. It took approx. half a century for America to grow its own distinct “artistic voice“.

Wieland

Gothic devices:
- Doppelgänger
- Ventriloquism (a disembodied voice)

The novel may be seen as a confirmation of human unpredictability (i.e. the Romanticist critique of reductive rationalism), but also a criticism of religious fanaticism.

The House of Seven Gables

A novel about a house haunted by ancient guilt – it was originally built on land that had been stolen from its rightful owner through an accusation of witchcraft.

The novel can be read as a democratic mistrust of dynastic families and aristocratic pedigrees.

Romanticism III: Revolt against the Age of Reason, Transcendentalism, transition between Romanticism and Realism

Many major Romantic writings can be read as a criticism of the preceding era (Enlightenment/Age of Reason) or even the legacy of Puritan America.

Basic critical arguments:

- Criticism of excessive rationalism: Intuition should complement pragmatic reasoning
- Collective interest of the community should not bulldoze individual choices
- Criticism of tabula rasa (i.e. Nature over nurture)

Criticism of excessive rationalism and the arrogance of empirical (scientific knowledge)

Exemplified by two stories by **Nathaniel Hawthorne**:
Birthmark (see the reading assignment)
Rapaccini's Daughter

The Scarlet Letter (1950)
Hester Prynne is stigmatized by the elders of late 17th century Boston for having a child out of the wedlock.

Central theme:
Freedom of an individual vs. rigid theocratic society

Romanticism: human beings are essentially good and, left in a state of **nature**, they would seek the good
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Neoclassicism (Age of Reason): society alone is responsible for keeping human beings from giving in to their own brutish **natures**

This reflects the Romantic view of man's steady degeneration from childhood to adulthood as s/he is corrupted by culture.

This philosophy is advocated by American **Transcendentalists**.

Major topics:

- God/Ethic is universal and transcends all religions
- essential perfectibility of the human spirit
- non-conformity, intellectual and spiritual independence
- self-reliance
- civil disobedience / passive resistance

Major representatives:
Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)
Henry David Thoreau (1817 - 1862)

Both are appreciated chiefly for their essays.

Ralph Waldo Emerson
Self-Reliance (1843)
“Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion.”

Henry David Thoreau

Walden (1854) A “diary” – set in Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, where he lived 2 years and 2 months “by the labor of his hands”

Civil Disobedience (1849) – the “passive resistance” principle later employed e.g. by Gandhi and Martin Luther King (Originally published as “Resistance to Civil Government”) – see the reading assignment

Q: Why did Thoreau protest? What did he disagree with?

Contrast between **Romanticism** and **Realism** (i.e. the subsequent movement)

Put in the simplest possible terms, Romanticist tend to emphasize the plot (the so called “narrative arc”) while Realists are more attentive to detail and character psychology.

Possibly the best example of an American novel that spans both Romanticist and Realistic traditions is **Moby Dick** by **Herman Melville** (1819 – 1891)

In *Moby Dick*, Melville pays significant attention to **realistic** detail. On the other hand, the larger than life character of Ahab and his self-destructive obsession with the white whale is close to the dark eccentric **romanticism** of Poe and Hawthorne.

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