

The "**Romantic Period**" refers to literary and cultural movements in England, Europe, and America roughly from **1770 to 1860**. Romantic writers (and artists) saw themselves as **revolting against the "Age of Reason"** (1700-1770) and its values. They **celebrated imagination/intuition versus reason/calculation**, spontaneity versus control, subjectivity and metaphysical musing versus objective fact, revolutionary energy versus tradition, individualism versus social conformity, democracy versus monarchy, and so on.

Romanticism appeared in the U.S. with **Washington Irving** (*Legend of Sleepy Hollow* 1820) and **Ralph Waldo Emerson** (*The American Scholar* in 1837, America's "Intellectual Declaration of Independence"). **Edgar Allan Poe**—was the most Romantic of all the authors, because he obsessively depicts sensitive, isolated individuals seeking the Beautiful or Ideal. **Emily Dickinson**, too.

It overlaps with the period in which U.S. culture may also be said to be "**Victorian**" (1830-1880). **Nathaniel Hawthorne** is both Romantic and Victorian (he is simultaneously fascinated by and worried about Hester's rebelliousness in *The Scarlet Letter* 1850).

Along with **Margaret Fuller** and others, they are Romantic, self-consciously part of a literary/philosophical/theological movement known as "**Transcendentalism**" (they had their own literary magazine, *The Dial*, which Fuller edited). Other works of the period--such as **Harriet Beecher Stowe's best-seller *Uncle Tom's Cabin***--are not "Romantic," but are rather much closer to the realistic fiction of **Victorian**.

The Romantics took a much different view of nature than the earlier Puritans who tended to see nature as the fallen "wilderness," full of "savage" Indians.

American Romantics will use symbols, myths, or fantastic elements (e.g., Walden Pond, the White Whale, the House of Usher) as the focus and expression of the protagonist's mental processes or to convey deeper psychological or archetypal themes. Their style is often very original and not rule/convention oriented (only Dickinson writes like Dickinson; only Whitman, like Whitman).

The primary feature of American Romanticism--**the obsession with and celebration of individualism**--takes on particular social relevance because **U.S. culture has always prized individualism and egalitarianism**.

Democracy elevates everyone (white males in this time period, that is) to the same status. One is no longer part of a traditional, old-world hierarchy. Everyone has a chance (given *laissez-faire* government) to maximize one's own worth (in America one is liberated to pursue one's aspirations without interference--that's what "liberalism" originally meant, and that is what Frederick Douglass wants at the end of his *Narrative*). But independence also leads to a sense of isolation.

Examples:

- 📖 **Emerson** worries in "**The American Scholar**" about imitation/parroting. He looks inward to find divine essence, which he claims we all share in common. So is he the ultimate democrat or a narcissist?
- 📖 **Henry David Thoreau** isolates/purifies himself at **Walden** pond.
- 📖 **Edgar Allan Poe** habitually portrays aristocratic, hyper-sensitive madmen in gothic enclosures.
- 📖 **Herman Melville** invests Ahab, a captain of a fishing boat, with a Homer-like or Shakespearean grandeur.
- 📖 **Emily Dickinson** does not go "public" by publishing her verse.
- 📖 **Walt Whitman** embraces the democratic masses, yet calls his major poem "**Song of Myself**".

Conditions that influenced American Romanticism:

Frontier promised opportunity for expansion, growth, freedom; Europe lacked this element.

Spirit of optimism invoked by the promise of an uncharted frontier.

Immigration brought new cultures and perspectives

Growth of industry in the north that further polarized the north and the agrarian south.

Search for new spiritual roots.

Literary Themes:

Highly imaginative and subjective

Common man as hero

Emotional intensity

Escapism

Nature as refuge, source of knowledge and/or spirituality

Characteristics:

- Characters and setting set apart from society; characters were not of our own conscious kind
- Static characters--no development shown
- Characterization--work proves the characters are what the narrator has stated or shown
- Universe is mysterious; irrational; incomprehensible
- Gaps in causality
- Formal language
- Good receive justice; nature can also punish or reward
- Silences of the text--universals rather than learned truths
- Plot arranged around crisis moments; plot is important
- Plot demonstrates
 - romantic love
 - honor and integrity
 - idealism of self
- Supernatural foreshadowing (dreams, visions)
- Description provides a "feeling" of the scene
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Sub Genre:

- Slave narrative: protest; struggle for authors self-realization/identity
- Domestic (sentimental): social visits; women secondary in their circumstances to men.
- Female gothic: devilish childhood; family doom; mysterious foundling; tyrannical father.
- Women's fiction: anti-sentimental
 - heroine begins poor and helpless
 - heroine succeeds on her own character
 - husbands less important than father
- Bildungsroman: initiation novel; growth from child to adult.

American Romanticists:

James Fenimore Cooper

Emily Dickinson

Frederick Douglass

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Margaret Fuller

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Washington Irving

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Herman Melville

Edgar Allen Poe

Henry David Thoreau

Walt Whitman

The **Hudson River School** was a mid-19th century American art movement embodied by a group of landscape painters whose aesthetic vision was influenced by romanticism. The artist **Thomas Cole** is generally acknowledged as the founder of the Hudson River School. (*Oxbow* by Thomas Cole below)

