

American Romanticism (The Early Romantics) 1800-1860



Historical Background:

- Period of great growth ...between 1800 and 1803 the country doubles in size
- This growth inspires an upsurge in national pride and self-awareness
- The 1828 election of Andrew Jackson, "the people's President," ushered in the era of the common man
- America becomes a player on the world stage
- Industrialization and technology flourish
- This economic growth brings both great promise and serious social issues with it...child labor, unsafe working conditions, discrimination against women, and the continuing conflict over slavery

Principles of Romanticism:

- Belief in the natural goodness of man...that man, in a state of nature, would behave well, but is hindered by civilization..."The Noble Savage"
- Sincerity, spontaneity, and faith in emotions as the markers of truth
- Focus on the individual...what is special in man is to be valued over what is representative...emphasis on self-analysis
- Nature as a source of instruction, delight and nourishment for the soul; return to nature as a source of inspiration and wisdom; celebration of man's connection to nature; life in nature often contrasted with the unnatural constraints of society
- Affirmation of the values of democracy and the freedom of the individual
- Interest in and respect for the past...medieval tales, folk tales, mythology and the Gothic...the expression of imagination, the exotic and the supernatural.

Romantic Sensibility:

- The Rationalistic view of urban life is replaced by the Romantic view
- Rationalists saw the city as a place to find success and self-realization
- Romantics saw the city as a place of moral corruption, poverty and death
- The Romantic journey is to the countryside...Romantics associated the country with independence, moral clarity and purity...an idyllic place of escape
- The "Gothic Romantic" (Edgar Allan Poe, for example) saw the country as a place of phantasm (illusion; a phantom)
- Romantics value feeling and intuition over reason.
- Imagination, emotion, spontaneity, feeling and Nature are more important than rational thought - "heart over mind"

Authors:

Washington Irving

America's first classic writer. His work is admired for its scene-painting, humor and for unforgettable characters that have become part of our national consciousness.

Irving "Americanized" familiar old German folktales and frequently included satire in his works.

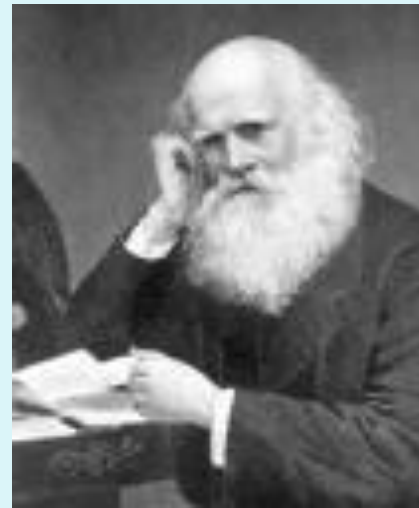


Authors:

William Cullen Bryant

In his twenties, Bryant left the rural scenes and Puritan conservatism of western Massachusetts for New York City. He produced a small body of verse of such a high quality that he is known as America's first major poet.

"Thanatopsis," one his most famous poems, offers a classically Romantic view of death as part of a natural, therefore good, process and nothing to be feared.



Authors:

James Fenimore Cooper

Cooper was America's first major novelist and is most famous for the development of the classic "Frontier Hero."

The characteristics of this very first American literary hero are:

- He is youthful, innocent, and pure of heart
- Has a sense of honor based not on society's rules, but on a higher principle
- Has knowledge of life/people through intuition
- Has a love of Nature
- Quests for a "higher truth" in the natural world

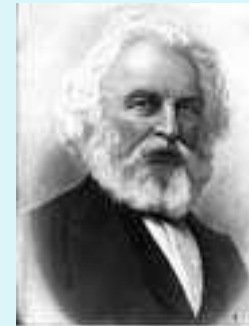


Authors: The Fireside Poets

Longfellow, Holmes, Lowell and Whittier

This group of poets, also known as the "Household Poets," were the first American poets to rival the popularity of British poets. They help bring about the literary coming of age of America. Characteristics of their works include:

- Emphasis on idealized traditional value
- Expression of Romantic desire to escape to a rural paradise of innocent peace
- Desire to reform society and create a better world
- Reflect patriotic sentimentality
- Belief in the triumph of virtue, freedom and love.



Authors: Edgar
Allan Poe

Contributions to American Literature

- Poet
- “Father of the Short Story” – raises this to an art form
- Inventor of the “detective story” – his character, August Dupain, is the model for Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes
- Literary critic – the first American to evaluate literary work by close analysis

