



# American Romanticism 1800-1860

Gary Q. Arpin

The following essay provides highlights of the historical period.

For a more detailed version of this essay, see  
*Elements of Literature*, pages 162–173.

**Literary Skills**  
Evaluate the philosophical, political, religious, ethical, and social influences of a historical period.

## The Romantic Sensibility: Celebrating Imagination

In general, Romanticism is the name given to those schools of thought that value feeling and intuition over reason. The first rumblings of Romanticism were felt in Germany in the second half of the eighteenth century. Romanticism had a strong influence on literature, music, and painting in Europe and England well into the nineteenth century. When it finally arrived in America, it took different forms.

10      Romanticism, especially in Europe, developed as part of a reaction against **rationalism**. The Romantics came to believe that, through the imagination, you could discover truths that the rational mind could not reach. To the Romantics, the imagination, individual feelings, and wild nature were of greater value than reason and logic.

Poetry was considered the highest embodiment of the Romantic imagination. Romantic artists often contrasted poetry with science, which they saw as destroying the very truth it claimed to seek. Edgar Allan Poe, for example, called science a “vulture”  
20      with wings of “dull realities,” preying on the hearts of poets.



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### IDENTIFY

What did the Romantics value (lines 3–4)? Circle the details that give you that information.

### WORD STUDY

The word *rationalism* in line 11 refers to the practice of accepting reason as the only authority in forming one's opinions or choosing a course of action. It comes from the word *rational*, which means “based on reason.”

### IDENTIFY

What was considered to be the highest embodiment of the Romantic imagination (lines 16–17)? Circle the answer.

### PARAPHRASE

Underline the two ways in which the Romantics sought a higher truth (lines 25–30). Restate these characteristics of Romanticism in your own words.

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### COMPARE & CONTRAST

Re-read lines 36–40. How did the Puritan view of nature differ from the Romantic view?

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### IDENTIFY

Pause at line 48. What did the development of the American novel coincide with? Circle the answer.

## Romantic Escapism: From Dull Realities to Higher Truths

- The Romantics wanted to rise above the “dull realities” to a realm of higher truth. They did this in two principal ways. First, the Romantics searched for exotic settings in the more “natural” past, far from the grimy and noisy industrial age. Sometimes they found this world in the supernatural realm or in old legends and folklore. Second, the Romantics tried to reflect on the natural world until dull reality fell away to reveal
- 30 underlying truth and beauty. This second Romantic approach is evident in many lyric poems. In a typical Romantic poem, the speaker sees an ordinary object or scene. A flower found by a stream or a bird flying overhead brings the speaker to some important, deeply felt insight, which is then recorded in the poem. This process is similar to the way the Puritans drew moral lessons from nature. The Puritans’ lessons were defined by their religion. The Romantics, on the other hand, found a less clearly defined divinity in nature. Their contemplation of the natural world led to a more generalized emotional and intellectual awakening.

## The American Novel and the Wilderness Experience

The development of the American novel coincided with westward expansion, with the growth of nationalist spirit, and with the rapid spread of cities. A geography of the imagination developed, in which town, country and frontier would play a powerful role in American life and literature—as they continue to do today.

- We can see how the novel developed by looking at the
- 50 career of James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851). Cooper explored uniquely American settings and characters: frontier communities, American Indians, and the wilderness of western New York and Pennsylvania. Most of all, he created the first American heroic

figure: Natty Bumppo (also known as Hawkeye, Deerslayer, and Leatherstocking), a skilled frontiersman whose simple morality and almost superhuman resourcefulness mark him as a true Romantic hero.

### ■ A New Kind of Hero

Cooper's Natty Bumppo is a triumph of American innocence and an example of one of the most important outgrowths of the early American novel: the American Romantic hero. Here was a new kind of heroic figure, one quite different from the hero of the Age of Reason. The rationalist hero was worldly, educated, sophisticated, and bent on making a place for himself in civilization. The typical hero of American Romantic fiction, on the other hand, was youthful, innocent, intuitive, and close to nature.

Today, Americans still create Romantic heroes; the twentieth- and twenty-first-century descendants of Natty Bumppo are all around us. They can be found in dozens of pop-culture heroes: the Lone Ranger, Superman, Luke Skywalker, Indiana Jones, and any number of western, detective, and fantasy heroes.



20th Century Fox (Courtesy Kobal).

Daniel Day-Lewis as Natty Bumppo in the movie *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992).

### IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 59–66. Underline the characteristics of the typical hero of Romantic fiction.

### IDENTIFY

Re-read the last paragraph on this page. Underline the pop-culture heroes that are descendants of Natty Bumppo.

### Notes

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**INTERPRET**

Re-read lines 74–81. Why didn't Romantic poets try to craft a unique American voice?

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**IDENTIFY**

Pause at line 88. How did the Fireside Poets get their name? Underline the answer.

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**IDENTIFY**

Who were the Transcendentalists (lines 98–103)?

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## American Romantic Poetry: Read at Every Fireside

The American Romantic novelists looked for new subject matter and new themes, but the opposite tendency appears in the works of the Romantic poets. They attempted to prove their sophistication by working solidly within European literary traditions rather than crafting a unique American voice. Even when they constructed poems with American settings and subject matter, the American Romantic poets used typically English themes, meter, and imagery.

The Fireside Poets—as the Boston group of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (page 73), John Greenleaf Whittier, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and James Russell Lowell was called—were, in their own time and for many decades afterward, the most popular poets America had ever produced. They were called Fireside Poets because their poems were often read aloud at the fireside as family entertainment.

The Fireside Poets were unable to recognize the poetry of the future, which was being written right under their noses. Whittier's response in 1855 to the first volume of a certain poet's work was to throw the book into the fire. Ralph Waldo Emerson's response was much more farsighted. "I greet you," Emerson wrote to this maverick new poet Walt Whitman, "at the beginning of a great career."

## The Transcendentalists: True Reality Is Spiritual

At the heart of America's coming-of-age were the Transcendentalists, who were led by Massachusetts writer and lecturer 100 Ralph Waldo Emerson (page 76). **Transcendental** refers to the idea that in determining the ultimate reality of God, the universe, the self, and other important matters, one must transcend, or go beyond, everyday human experience in the physical world.

For Emerson, Transcendentalism was not a new philosophy but "the very oldest of thoughts cast into the mold of these new

times.” That “oldest of thoughts” was idealism. Idealists said that true reality was found in ideas rather than in the world as perceived by the senses.

110 Idealists sought the permanent reality that underlies physical appearances. The Americans who called themselves Transcendentalists were idealists but in a broader, more practical sense. Like many Americans today, they also believed in human perfectibility, and they worked to achieve this goal.

## ■ Emerson and Transcendentalism: The American Roots

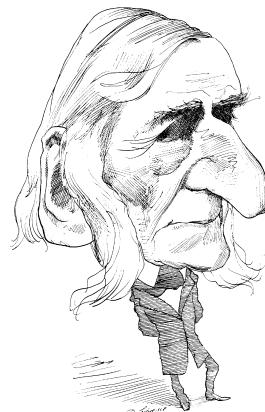
120

Emerson was the most influential and best-known member of the Transcendentalist group. His writing and that of his friend Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) clearly and forcefully expressed Transcendentalist ideas. As developed by Emerson, Transcendentalism grafted ideas from Europe and Asia onto a homegrown American philosophical stem. Its American roots included Puritan thought and Romantic tradition. “Every natural fact,” Emerson wrote, “is a symbol of some spiritual fact.”

## ■ Emerson's Optimistic Outlook

130 Emerson's view of the world sprang not from logic but from intuition. Intuition is our capacity to know things spontaneously and immediately through our emotions rather than through our reasoning abilities. Intuitive thought—the kind Emerson believed in—contrasts with the rational thinking of someone like Benjamin Franklin. Franklin did not gaze on nature and feel the presence of a Divine Soul; he looked at nature and saw something to be examined scientifically and used to help humanity.

An intense feeling of optimism was one product of Emerson's belief that we can find God directly in nature. God is good, and God works through nature, Emerson believed. If we



*Ralph Waldo Emerson.*  
Drawing by David Levine.  
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## IDENTIFY

Pause at line 118. What were the beliefs of the idealists? Underline the answer.

## IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 129–135.  
Underline the definition of  
*intuition*.

## COMPARE & CONTRAST

Pause at line 137. In what way did Emerson's and Franklin's approaches to knowledge differ?

### INTERPRET

Re-read lines 144–150. Why was Emerson's optimism appealing to the audiences of his day?

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can simply trust ourselves—that is, trust in the power each of us has to know God directly—then we will realize that each of us is also part of the Divine Soul, the source of all good.

Emerson's sense of optimism and hope appealed to audiences who lived in a period of economic downturns, regional strife, and conflict over slavery. Your condition today, Emerson seemed to tell his readers and his listeners, may seem dull and disheartening, but it need not be. If you discover the God within you, he suggested, your lives will become a part of the grandeur of the universe.

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### FLUENCY

Read the boxed passage aloud twice. In your second reading, try to improve your speed as well as your comprehension.

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### CLARIFY

Pause at line 174. Why are Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe called Dark Romantics?

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## The Dark Romantics

Emerson's idealism was exciting for his audiences, but not all the writers and thinkers of the time agreed with Transcendentalist thought. "To one who has weathered Cape Horn as a common sailor," Herman Melville wrote scornfully of Emerson's ideas, "what stuff all this is."

Some people think of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe as anti-Transcendentalists, because their views of the world seem opposed to the optimistic views of Emerson and his followers. But these Dark Romantics, as they are known, had much in common with the Transcendentalists. Both groups valued intuition over logic and reason. Both groups, like the Puritans before them, saw signs and symbols in all events—as Anne Bradstreet found spiritual significance in the fire that destroyed her house (page 15).

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In contrast to Emerson, however, the Dark Romantics did not believe that nature is necessarily good or harmless. Their view of existence developed from both the mystical and melancholy features of Puritan thought. In their works they explored the conflict between good and evil, the psychological effects of guilt and sin, and even madness. Behind the pasteboard masks of social respectability, the Dark Romantics saw the blankness and the horror of evil. From this imaginative, unflinching vision they shaped a uniquely American literature.

**American Romanticism  
1800–1860**

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The following essay provides highlights of the historical period.  
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*Elements of Literature*, pages 162–173.

**Literary Skills Focus**  
Literary skills focus on political, religious, ethical, and social influences of historical periods.

**Notes**

**The Romantic Sensibility:  
Celebrating Imagination**

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Romanticism, especially in Europe, developed as part of a reaction against rationalism. The Romantics came to believe that, through the imagination, you could discover truths that the rational mind could not reach. To the Romantics, the imagination, individual feelings, and wild nature were of greater value than reason and logic.

Poetry was considered the highest embodiment of the Romantic imagination. Romantic artists often contrasted poetry with science, which they saw as destroying the very truth it claimed to seek. Edgar Allan Poe, for example, called science a "vulture" with wings of "dull realities" preying on the hearts of poets.

**IDENTIFY** What did the Romantics value (lines 3–4)? Circle the details that give you that information.

**WORD STUDY** The word *rationalism* in line 11 refers to the practice of accepting reason as the only authority in forming one's opinions or choosing a course of action. It comes from the word *rational*, which means "based on reason."

**IDENTIFY** What was considered to be the highest embodiment of the Romantic imagination (line 16–17)? Circle the answer.

**American Romanticism** 67

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**American  
Romanticism  
(1800–1860)**

**Illustration by Wilfred Satty for Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher."**  
Reprinted by permission of Warner Books, Inc., New York, NY USA.  
From *The Illustrated Edgar Allan Poe* by Wilfred Satty and Edgar Allan Poe. Copyright © 1996. All rights reserved.  
Mark Ryden.

**figure:** Natty Bumppo (also known as Hawkeye, Deerslayer, and Leatherstocking), a skilled frontiersman whose simple morality and almost superhuman resourcefulness mark him as a true Romantic hero.

**■ A New Kind of Hero**

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20th Century Fox (Courtesy Kobal).

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**Romantic Escapism:  
From Dull Realities to Higher Truths**

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Sometimes they found this world in the supernatural realm or in old legends and folklore. Second, the Romantics tried to reflect on the natural world until dull reality fell away to reveal underlying truth and beauty. This second Romantic approach is evident in many lyric poems. In a typical Romantic poem, the speaker sees an ordinary object or scene. A flower found by a stream or a bird flying overhead brings the speaker to some important, deeply felt insight, which is then recorded in the poem. This process is similar to the way the Puritans drew moral lessons from nature. The Puritans' lessons were defined by their religion. The Romantics, on the other hand, found a less clearly defined divinity in nature. Their contemplation of the natural world led to a more generalized emotional and intellectual awakening.

**■ PARAPHRASE**

Underline the two ways in which the Romantics sought a higher truth (lines 25–30). Restate these characteristics of Romanticism in your own words.

**They looked at the natural world as well as legends, folklore, and the supernatural.**

**They also tried to find beauty through nature.**

**■ COMPARE & CONTRAST**

Re-read lines 36–40. How did the Puritan view of nature differ from the Romantic view?

**■ The Puritans saw moral lessons in nature. The Romantics found a general emotional and intellectual awakening through nature.**

**■ IDENTIFY**

Pause at line 48. What did the development of the American novel coincide with? Circle the answer.

**The American Novel and the Wilderness Experience**

The development of the American novel coincided with westward expansion, with the growth of nationalist spirit, and with the rapid spread of cities. A geography of the imagination developed, in which town, country and frontier would play a powerful role in American life and literature—as they continue to do today.

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Pause at line 118. What were the beliefs of the idealists? Underline the answer.

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■ Emerson and Transcendentalism:  
The American Roots

Emerson was the most influential and best-known member of the Transcendentalist group. His writing and that of his friend Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) clearly and forcefully expressed Transcendentalist ideas. As developed by Emerson, Transcendentalism grafted ideas from Europe and Asia onto a homegrown American philosophical stem. Its American roots included Puritan thought and Romantic tradition. “Every natural fact,” Emerson wrote, “is a symbol of some spiritual fact.”

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Emerson’s view of the world sprang not from logic but from intuition. Intuition is our capacity to know things spontaneously and immediately through our emotions rather than through our reasoning abilities. Intuitive thought—the kind Emerson believed in—contrasts with the rational thinking of someone like Benjamin Franklin. Franklin did not gaze on nature and feel the presence of a Divine Soul; he looked at nature and saw something to be examined scientifically and used to help humanity.

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**American Romantic Poetry:**  
**Read at Every Fireside**

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The Fireside Poets were unable to recognize the poetry of the future, which was being written right under their noses. Whittier’s response in 1855 to the first volume of a certain poet’s work was to throw the book into the fire. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s response was much more forgiving. “I greet you,” Emerson wrote to this maverick new poet Walt Whitman, “at the beginning of a great career.”

**INTERPRET**

Re-read lines 74–81. Why didn’t Romantic poets try to craft a unique American voice? **They wanted to prove their sophistication, so they imitated the English style of writing.**

80 Pause at line 88. How did the Fireside Poets get their name? Underline the answer.

**IDENTIFY**

Who were the Transcendentalists (lines 98–103)? **The Transcendentalists were a group of thinkers led by Ralph Waldo Emerson. They believed that one must transcend, or go beyond, everyday human experience to understand God or arrive at truths.**

90 At the heart of America’s coming-of-age were the Transcendentalists, who were led by Massachusetts writer and lecturer Ralph Waldo Emerson (page 76). Transcendental refers to the idea that in determining the ultimate reality of God, the universe, the self, and other important matters, one must transcend, or go beyond, everyday human experience in the physical world.

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## Before You Read

### The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls

by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

LITERARY FOCUS: METER

Meter is a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in poetry. Meter gives poetry rhythm. You can hear the meter of a poem when you read it aloud. Stressed syllables are emphasized more than unstressed syllables.

Analyzing the meter of a poem is called scanning. You can use special marks to scan a poem. The stress mark (') is placed over each stressed syllable. The “short” mark (˘) is placed over each unstressed syllable. Read aloud this line from “The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls,” emphasizing the syllables marked with a “˘” symbol.

Along / the sea- / sands damp / and brown

Why Does Meter Matter? Think of a line from a poem or song. Write it in the space below. Read the line aloud several times, marking the stressed syllables with a “˘” symbol and the unstressed syllables with a “˘”. Then, use your symbols to read the line aloud once more, emphasizing the meter.

Example: Happy birthday to you.

READING SKILLS: PARAPHRASING

One way to better understand the meaning of a text is to paraphrase, or restate its ideas in your own words. Here is an example of how a line from “The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls” can be paraphrased.



**Literary Skills**  
Understand meter.  
**Reading Skills**  
Paraphrase to clarify text.

<b>Possible Paraphrase</b>	<b>Original Line</b>
Night is falling. A shorebird cries out.	The twilight darkens, the curlew calls

Use the Skill As you read the poem, pause after each stanza. Paraphrase each line in the stanza using your own words. Your paraphrase should include the important details expressed in each stanza.

The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls 73

can simply trust ourselves—that is, trust in the power each of us has to know God directly—then we will realize that each of us is also part of the Divine Soul, the source of all good.

Emerson's sense of optimism and hope appealed to audiences who lived in a period of economic downturns, regional strife, and conflict over slavery. Your condition today, Emerson seemed to tell his readers and his listeners, may seem dull and disheartening, but it need not be. If you discover the God within you, he suggested, your lives will become a part of the grandeur of the universe.

**The Dark Romantics**

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In contrast to Emerson, however, the Dark Romantics did not believe that nature is necessarily good or harmless. Their view of existence developed from both the mystical and melancholy features of Puritan thought. In their works they explored the conflict between good and evil, the psychological effects of guilt and sin, and even madness. Behind the pastelboard masks of social respectability, the Dark Romantics saw the blankness and the horror of evil. From this imaginative, unflinching vision they shaped a uniquely American literature.

**INTERPRET**

Re-read lines 144–150. Why was Emerson's optimism appealing to the audiences of his day?

**Audiences of his day were poor, struggling, and conflicted over slavery. They appreciated hearing optimistic sentiments.**

**FLUENCY**

Read the boxed passage aloud twice. In your second reading, try to improve your speed as well as your comprehension.

**CLARITY**

Pause at line 174. Why are Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe called Dark Romantics? They explored such issues as the conflict between good and evil, and the effects of sin, guilt, and madness.