

# Unit 03: American Romanticism/Transcendentalism

## 1820-1860

Content Area: **English**  
Course(s): **English 3**  
Time Period: **Semester 1**  
Length: **10 weeks**  
Status: **Published**

### Unit Introduction

---

**A multifaceted movement in music, painting, and literature that originated in Germany and Britain during the 18th century. Although it is notoriously impossible to define, romanticism is generally a reaction against rationalism and materialism.**

It can be broadly represented as a series of beliefs: in the primacy of the imagination rather than in a purely rational mode of apprehending and understanding reality; in the imagination's transformative power to invest reality with meaning; in the importance of individuality and personal freedom, and in the value of spontaneity and self-expression as opposed to artificiality and restraint. Commonly, there is also a pastoral element to romanticism, an exaltation of untamed nature and a consequent desire to find and express one's own individual nature. Other romantic characteristics include an admiration for the individuated hero who has broken from social restraints and a representation of the poet as prophet or visionary. Although often represented as primarily an aesthetic movement, romanticism has important political, social, and nationalistic dimensions. Its support for the ideals of democracy and republicanism derives from a fundamental belief in human equality, while as an optimistic, utopian philosophy, romanticism also envisions the perfectibility of the individual and of society through self-realization, progress, and reform. In romantic thought there is often an idealization of primitive "natural" societies, and antagonism toward what is perceived as repressive artificial civilization.

Romanticism is crucial to American culture, to the extent that the very creation of the United States has been considered an expression of romantic thought. It was the central movement of the American Renaissance, being most readily mediated through transcendentalism, and it continues to exert a profound influence on American thought and writing. In this respect the importance of Ralph Waldo Emerson can hardly be exaggerated, since he both mediated European romantic thought and adapted it to the American intellectual situation. Romanticism perhaps has its fullest and least ambiguous expression in the work of Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, but it has been a central concern in the work of numerous writers, notably [James Fenimore Cooper](#), William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878), Edgar Allan Poe, [Herman Melville](#), Emily Dickinson, [Mark Twain](#), [Kate Chopin](#), Wallace Stevens, [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#), Hart Crane (1899-1932), [Vladimir Nabokov](#) (1899-1977), and Sylvia Plath.

"American Masters" - PBS. From THE ESSENTIAL GLOSSARY: AMERICAN LITERATURE by Stephen Matterson. © 2003 [Stephen Matterson](#). Reprinted by permission of the author.

### *AMERICAN ROMANTICISM OVERVIEW [1]*

"Romanticism," as a term, derives from "romance," which from the Medieval Period (1200-1500) and on simply meant a s (e.g. all the chivalric, King Arthur legends) that was adventuristic and improbable. "Romances" are distinguished from "n

---

which emphasize the mundane and realistic. The period between 1860 and 1900, for the U.S., is often called "The Age of Realism," because of the many authors (e.g., Theodore Dreiser & Stephen Crane) who present their novels' subject matter in a realistic manner (Melville's monomaniacal Ahab, chasing a monstrous, symbolic whale, would be out of place in a realistic novel, although *Moby-Dick* has many realistic details about the whaling industry).

The "Romantic Period" refers to literary and cultural movements in England, Europe, and America roughly from 1770 to 1830. 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 music versus objective fact, revolutionary energy versus tradition, individualism versus social conformity, democracy versus monarchy, and so on. The movement begins in Germany with the publication of Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (about a love-sick, alienated artist type, too sensitive to live, who kills himself; after it was published a number of young men committed suicide in imitation!) and the emergence of various Idealist philosophers (who believed mental processes are the ultimately real reality, as opposed to Materialists). The movement then goes to England (Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, Keats), until about 1830 (upon which the Victorian Age begins). Romanticism does not appear in the U.S. until Irving and Emerson are writing; so, somewhat confusingly, the Romantic Period in the U.S. (1830-1860) overlaps with the period in England. U.S. culture may also be said to be "Victorian" (1830-1880). One consequence of the latter: a writer such as Hawthorne is both Romantic and Victorian (he is simultaneously fascinated by and worried about Hester's rebelliousness in *The Scarlet Letter*). 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 Britain's George Eliot.

Very generally, we also distinguish "Romantic" from "Classical" values and types of expression, without referring to any particular time period. Thus, you can come up with a list of atemporal oppositions:

## ROMANTIC

Emotional

Individualistic

Revolutionary

Loves Solitude & Nature

Fantasy/Introspection

The Particular

## NON-ROMANTIC/CLASSICAL

Reasonable and Practical

Public Responsibility

Conservative

Loves Public, Urban Life

External Reality

The Universal

Subjective Perception

Objective Science

Right Brain

Left Brain

Satisfaction of Desire

Desire Repressed

Organic

Mechanical

Creative Energy/Power

Form

Exotic

Mundane

"Noble Savage"/Outcasts

Bourgeois Family

Idealist Philosophy

Materialist/Empirical Philosophy

The problem with the attempt to define literary movements and particular literary/cultural periods is that authors seldom fit neatly into the boxes we construct for them. Emerson and Thoreau, along with Margaret Fuller, 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). They privileged imagination and wanted resuscitate spiritual values in a era in which institutional religion dominated (or so they felt). According to them are, if we only knew it, Gods in ruin, with the power to regain our spiritual birthright by attending to the divine within. Poe, Dickinson, Melville, and Hawthorne, however, were not Transcendentalists, and often (implicitly or explicitly) critique Emersonian idealism. Poe--the most Romantic of all the authors, because he obsessively depicts sensitive, isolated individuals seeking the Beautiful or Ideal--was the least in step with the other writers we are reading: the other male writers celebrate democratic possibilities (and are often in love with the "common man") whereas Poe scorns the masses. Poe's position on slavery was less than enlightened.

American Romantics tend to venerate Nature as a sanctum of non-artificiality, where the Self can fulfill its potential (the Puritans tended to see nature as the fallen "wilderness," full of "savage" Indians). American Romantics also champion spirit intuition or self-reliant individualism (which some intellectual historians argue is a secularized outgrowth of Reformation Protestant radicalism). They often, however, illustrate the egotistic, futile, and destructive aspects of their questing heroes; they highlight how such self-reliance or intuitions conflict with conventional social and religious dogma (Fuller and Dickinson). Socially, American Romantics are usually radically egalitarian and politically progressive (Poe is the exception) and, in terms of Melville and Whitman, receptive to non-heterosexual relations (Whitman was definitely gay; Melville perhaps). In terms of literary technique, American Romantics will use symbols, myths, or fantastic elements (e.g., Walden Pond, the White 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 significance because U.S. culture has always prized individualism and egalitarianism. Democracy elevates everyone (white men 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 (no traditional, supportive community; families on the move West, etc.). Without traditional context, insecurity about values arises, and thus, somewhat paradoxically, there emerges a continued preoccupation with what everyone else thinks. The average middle-class person aspires to be like everyone else. American Romantic writers like democracy and see the dignity of common folk, but also--usually only implicitly--are troubled by the loss of distinction. It is key to see that American Romantics can both celebrate the "common man" and their own, more spiritually/psychologically elite selves. Thus,

📖 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?

📖 Thoreau isolates/purifies himself at Walden pond.

📖 Poe habitually portrays aristocratic, hyper-sensitive madmen in gothic enclosures.

📖 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.

📖 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  
Emotional intensity  
Escapism  
Common man as hero  
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

### **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

### **European Romanticists:**

William Blake  
Lord Byron (George)

Frederick Douglass  
Ralph Waldo Emerson  
Margaret Fuller  
Nathaniel Hawthorne  
Washington Irving  
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow  
Herman Melville  
Edgar Allen Poe  
Henry David Thoreau  
Walt Whitman

Gordan)  
Samuel Coleridge  
John Keats  
Ann Radcliffe  
Mary Wollstonecraft  
Shelley  
Percy Bysshe Shelley

Unpublished material copyright © 1997 by Dr. Brad Strickland, Department of English, Gainesville College, Gainesville, GA 30503 (USA). Permission is granted to reproduce, distribute, or alter this material for educational purposes.

## **Progress Indicators for Reading Literature**

---

LA.RL.11-12.2	Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
LA.RL.11-12.4	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (e.g., Shakespeare as well as other authors.)
LA.RL.11-12.5	Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g.,

the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

LA.RL.11-12.7

Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (e.g., Shakespeare and other authors.)

LA.RL.11-12.9

Demonstrate knowledge of and reflect on (e.g., practical knowledge, historical/cultural context, and background knowledge) eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century foundational works of literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

## **Progress Indicators for Reading Informational Text**

---

LA.RI.11-12.1

Accurately cite strong and thorough textual evidence, (e.g., via discussion, written response, etc.), to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferentially, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

LA.RI.11-12.2

Determine two or more central ideas of a text, and analyze their development and how they interact to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.

LA.RI.11-12.3

Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

LA.RI.11-12.6

Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.

## **Progress Indicators for Writing**

---

LA.W.11-12.2.B

Develop the topic thoroughly by selecting the most significant and relevant facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic.

LA.W.11-12.3.B

Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

LA.W.11-12.3.C

Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome (e.g., a sense of mystery, suspense, growth, or resolution).

LA.W.11-12.3.D

Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

LA.W.11-12.3.E

Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.

LA.W.11-12.7

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

LA.W.11-12.10

Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes.

## **Progress Indicators for Speaking and Listening**

---

LA.SL.11-12.1.C	Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.
LA.SL.11-12.1.D	Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.
LA.SL.11-12.3	Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.
LA.SL.11-12.4	Present information, findings and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically. The content, organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
LA.SL.11-12.6	Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating a command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

## **Progress Indicators for Language**

---

LA.L.11-12.3.A	Vary syntax for effect, apply an understanding of syntax to the study of complex texts.
LA.L.11-12.4.A	Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence, paragraph, or text; a word's position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.
LA.L.11-12.4.B	Identify and correctly use patterns of word changes that indicate different meanings or parts of speech (e.g., conceive, conception, conceivable).
LA.L.11-12.4.D	Verify the preliminary determination of the meaning of a word or phrase (e.g., by checking the inferred meaning in context or in a dictionary).
LA.L.11-12.5.B	Analyze nuances in the meaning of words with similar denotations.
LA.L.11-12.6	Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

## **Essential Questions**

---

What characteristics of legends and folktales appear in early American short stories?

What "American" character archetypes begin to appear in the literature of the early 1800s?

What are the features of Romantic and Transcendentalist philosophies, and how are they demonstrated through works of the time?

## **Content/Skills**

---

**The following materials can be used in, but not limited to, the American Romantic Period (1800-1861)**

1. Short stories of Washington Irving: The Devil and Tom Walker, Legend of Sleepy Hollow, Rip Van Winkle (Origins of American Humor, Henpecked Husband Archetype, American fairy tale, Ichabod Crane archetype)



2. Short Stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne: Young Goodman Brown, Minister's Black Veil, Rappaccinni's Daughter, Dr. Heidegger's Experiment
3. Short stories of Edgar Allan Poe
4. Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter (entire novel/ or excerpts)
5. Thoreau's Walden (entire chapters/ excerpts)
6. Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience"
7. Emerson's essays: Nature, Friendship, American Scholar, Gifts, Self-Reliance
8. Martin Luther King's "Letters from Birmingham Jail."
9. Excerpt from film "The Great Debators" with Denzel Washington (end of film)
10. Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass
11. Emily Dickinson's collection of poems
12. Poems from William Cullen Bryant, Longfellow, Whittier
13. Nonfiction excerpts from Kant's Critique of Pure Reason
14. Excerpts from Moby Dick
15. The play "The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail"
16. The play "Inherit the Wind"
17. Research topics
18. Excerpts from nonfiction title: Carson's Silent Spring
19. Literary criticism from databases: Bloom's, etc.
20. Readings on climate change and Civil Disobedience
21. Ayn Rand's Anthem.
22. The Beats: 1950s. Various readings: Howl, On the Road, various poems
23. Grammar
24. James Fennimore Cooper The Deerslayer
25. James Fenimore Cooper The Last of the Mohicans
- 26 Excerpts from Herman Melville's Typee

-

**Supplementary Materials include, but are not limited to:**

Complete Set of Transcendentalism

Videos: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1jyRZmu9nOQ&list=PL8C204DF8B9F489C9>

Affluenza Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFZz6ICzpjI>

Affluenza article: <http://wearethatfamily.com/2014/01/what-really-happens-when-we-give-kids-everything-they-want/> (Possible debate?)

The 365-Grateful Project article: <http://shine.yahoo.com/healthy-living/how-a-year-of--grateful--facebook-posts-changed-this-woman-s-life-190520260.html>

Mitch Albom's Reflections on Morrie: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gr0COGuAA4U>

The Last of the Mohicans Motion Picture (1992) Directed by Michael Mann

Moby Dick Motion Picture (1956) Directed by John Huston Screenplay by Ray Bradbury and John Huston

**Vocabulary Applications include, but are not limited to:**

**Honors/Accelerated:**

Mirror and Windows: Connecting with Literature, American Tradition UNIT 3 words in context

Literary terms and related words in context to reading selections

**College Prep:**

Advanced Vocabulary Skills, Fourth Edition

Literary terms and related words in context to reading selections

**Independent Reading Selections tied to Themes or Time Period:**

- <http://www.pbs.org/teachers/readlanguage/inventory/literatureamerican-912.html>