American Romanticism
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INTRODUCTORY OVERVIEW

"Romanticism," as a term, derives from "romance," which from the Medieval Period (1200-1500) and on simply meant a story (e.g. all the chivalric, King Arthur legends) that was adventuristic and improbable. "Romances" are distinguished from "novels," 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 1860. Romantic writers (and artists) saw themselves as revolting against the "Age of Reason" or "Enlightenment" period (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. 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 (Immanuel Kant, for example) who believed mental processes are the ultimately reality, as opposed to Empiricists which see the mind shaped by what it perceives. The movement then goes to England (Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, and 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 which 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 and erotic liberties 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.

Keep in mind, too, that cultural-literary periods (the "Renaissance," the "Enlightenment," "Romanticism," "Modernism") do not perfectly match up with mass culture or middle-brow culture of the same time period: Emerson was very famous as an inspirational essayist in his own lifetime, but he lived, himself, a conventional life and the radicalism implied in his essays did not lead to wholesale revolt … i.e. although Emerson was the center of the Transcendentalist movement, the entirety of New England society was most definitely not "transcendentalist."

That said, in the broad trajectory from the Medieval/feudal-hierarchical (castle) historical era, through the Renaissance and Enlightenment-scientific to the nineteenth-century/Industrial Age (factories), and on up to Modernity/Contemporary (mall) consumer-capitalist society, the

Romantic period does represent a very important stage in the progress of liberty as a philosophical, political, and aesthetic idea. Karl Marx's idealism (that work should be a form of self-expression, not servitude to an assembly-line) draws upon his Romantic predecessors; as does, say, Martin Luther King's belief in the supreme dignity of every individual.

[Warning--professor rant ahead: One of the most unfortunate ironies of cultural-societal history is that the supreme value of Romanticism--a deep sense of interiority (what this course calls "sublimity within")--has become vulgarized in democratical/consumeristic culture into the freedom of individuals to choose fads, products, indeed lifestyles (be hip, if you only have the right type of cell phone!): capitalism's entrepreneurial energy resonates with Romantic individualism (Emerson, it turns out, is one of the favorite authors of capitalist ideologues!), but it is the void within that causes us, in the 21st century, to seek to be fulfilled with the euphoria of our consumer purchases.]

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

ROMANTIC	NON-ROMANTIC or CLASSICAL
Emotional	Reasonable and Practical
Individualistic	Public Responsibility
Revolutionary	Conservative
Loves Solitude & Nature	Loves Public, Urban Life
Fantasy/Introspection	External Reality
The Particular	The Universal
Subjective Perception	Objective Science
Right Brain	Left Brain
Satisfaction of Desire	Desire Repressed
Organic	Mechanical
Creative Energy-Power	Form
"Noble Savage"-Outcasts	Bourgeois Family

For a quick comparison of the difference between "Romanticism" and the preceding literary-cultural period, the "Age of Reason"/"Enlightenment," juxtapose the Peale painting "The Artist in His Museum" (go to link Peale Painting and Franklin perfection chart), which epitomizes the Enlightenment values of measurement, rationality, and clarity, with a typical Frederic Church painting, a generation later, which emphasizes nature's sublime vastness (go to link: Church).

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. Emily Dickinson, although seemingly quintessentially "Romantic," in her protection of her own inwardness/solitude, in fact regularly read newspaper items about the U.S. Civil War and other major political events of her day and much of her poetry, while intensely idiosyncratic, also replays genres (poems about "good" deaths) that were commonplace in mass-culture magazines of the day. Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin is about as "Victorian" as you can get (sentimental depictions, values of the family embraced, a plot driven to make a moral point) and yet also takes us into some dark and turmoiled psychological terrains (the sadomasochism of Uncle Tom's death) that are as "gothic" as what Poe imagines.

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 to resuscitate spiritual values in a era in which institutional religion dominated (or so they felt). According to them, we 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 earlier Puritans tended to see nature as the fallen "wilderness," full of "savage" Indians). American Romantics also champion spiritual 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. Or 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 the case 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 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 laisse-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.; see the DeTocqueville quote/e-text). 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 (and to be seduced by the products of capitalist-consumer culture). 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 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.