

Learning Objectives

For pages 178–186

In studying this text, you will focus on the following objectives:

Literary Study:

- Analyzing literary periods.
- Analyzing literary genres.
- Evaluating historical influences.
- Connecting to the literature.

AMERICAN ROMANTICISM 1800–1860

Historical, Social, and Cultural Forces

The Industrial Revolution

In the mid-1700s, a huge economic change known as the Industrial Revolution began in Britain. Manufacturing shifted from skilled workers using hand tools to unskilled laborers tending large, complex machines. Factories, some housing hundreds of machines and workers, replaced home-based workshops. Manufacturers sold their goods nationwide or abroad instead of just locally.



In the 1840s, railroads reduced the travel time from New York to Boston from a week (by stagecoach) to less than 12 hours.

The Industrial Revolution soon spread to the United States, where it caused tremendous economic growth and transformed American society. Hundreds of new factories were built. The Boston Manufacturing Company, for example, employed thousands of women and children, who worked for lower wages than men and in often dangerous conditions. An expanding network of roads and canals united different sections of the country. Two new inventions—the steamboat and the railroad—revolutionized transportation.

The Industrial Revolution brought economic growth, but it also helped divide Americans into two nations. The North had large cities and an economy based on manufacturing. The South had few large cities and a farming economy dominated by a single crop—cotton. Much of this cotton was grown on large plantations worked by slaves. In time, these divisions would bring the Civil War.

The Age of Reform

In the 1820s, idealistic Americans produced an outburst of reform movements. Many of these reformers were inspired by the Second Great Awakening, a major religious movement that reached its peak in the 1820s and 1830s. During the Age of Reform, Americans banded together in dozens of organizations to end slavery, stop drunkenness, secure women's rights, provide better care for the mentally ill, and improve prisons.

Roots of Romanticism

Optimism and Individualism

Romanticism was a movement in art and thought that dominated Europe and the United States throughout much of the 1800s. Romantic writers valued imagination and feeling over intellect and reason. Some celebrated individualism and freedom; they believed in the basic goodness and equality of human beings and in their right to govern themselves. Others took a more pessimistic view of human life. Overall, Romanticism reflected a division between a “bright” and a “dark” vision of the world.

Kinship with Nature

Another attitude that the Romantics shared was a belief in the importance of nature. In the 1700s, many European thinkers had believed that nature was merely a wilderness to be tamed. In opposition to this view, the Romantics celebrated the beauty, power, and wonder of the natural world. They also stressed the value of nature as a spiritual and moral guide for humanity. The Romantics’

reverence for nature also caused them to fear the destructive effects of industry.

“A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

The Power of Darkness

Many Romantics were drawn to the nonrational side of human nature, such as the emotions, imagination, intuition—even evil and insanity. They were also fascinated by remote periods of history and exotic places. These interests came together in Gothic literature—literature with a brooding atmosphere that emphasizes the unknown and inspires fear. Gothic novels typically feature wild and remote settings, such as haunted castles or wind-blasted moors, and their plots involve violent or mysterious events.

PREVIEW

Big Ideas

of American Romanticism

1

Optimism and Individualism

Optimism is the belief that the world around us is always improving. Some American Romantics presented an optimistic view of the possibility of human progress, based in part on a democratic confidence in the ability of ordinary individuals to better themselves, their political system, and society.

See pages 180–181.

2

Kinship with Nature

Many American Romantics believed in the beneficial effects of a close link between humanity and nature. This belief coexisted with a concern that the spread of industry and new technology threatened the natural world and isolated people from it.

See pages 182–183.

3

The Power of Darkness

There was a dark underside to American Romanticism. It took a variety of forms, including a fascination with disease, madness, death, evil, the supernatural, and the destructive aspects of nature.

See pages 184–185.

Big Idea 3

The Power of Darkness

Our experience of life and the world has a dark side. We fear the evils we know—poverty, violence, disease, madness, death—and are troubled by nameless terrors that might lurk in the shadows beyond our knowledge. Not all the important American writers of Emerson's time shared his optimism. Nathaniel Hawthorne (see pages 278–292) admired Emerson but thought him unrealistic. To Herman Melville (see pages 294–305), Emerson's optimism was “nonsense” that ignored the “disagreeable facts” of life.

Hawthorne and Melville

Almost all of Hawthorne's fiction is based on stories of the past, particularly the history and legends of his Puritan ancestors in New England. In Puritan New England, he found a strange, stark world that provided a richly textured background for the explorations of the nature of good and evil in his fiction. Hawthorne's friend Melville first gained a literary reputation for romantic tales of adventure in the South Seas. In succeeding books, he used his sea stories to explore the mystery of the evil that he saw in both human life and the forces of nature. In Melville's masterpiece, *Moby-Dick*, Ahab, the crazed captain of a whaling ship, sees evil personified in a huge white whale.

Gothic Horror

The dark side of European Romanticism can be seen in the tradition of Gothic literature. A classic example from nineteenth-century England is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a novel about a monster that destroys its creator. The American Romantics also recognized the power of darkness. Gothic horror relies chiefly on atmosphere, or mood, to achieve its effects. Writers create an atmosphere of horror through plot, characters, and settings that most people find chilling. Plots often focus on mysterious happenings, tragic events, and hideous

outcomes. Characters are often mad, half-mad, or frightened to death. They may exhibit strange behavior and physical traits. Settings are dark and often contain decayed dwellings with shadowy passageways, haunting sounds, and damp rooms.

Poe and the Terror of the Soul

A European tradition of Gothic literature existed long before Edgar Allan Poe (see pages 254–275), but he was the first American master of this type of horror. In his poems and stories, Poe often bettered earlier Gothic writers in achieving spine-tingling effects. Most of his stories and poems deal with loss and sorrow, ruin and revenge, disease and death. Poe's literary works reflected his own troubles and fears, but many readers responded favorably to his subject matter and to the mood of his works, thus confronting their own fears. Emerson and the Transcendentalists believed that humans are inherently good. By contrast, Poe seems to have had an instinctive feel for the dark impulses of human nature. Poe observed, “The terror of which I write is not of Germany [the setting of much Gothic fiction], but of the soul.” He expressed this spiritual terror in haunting literary works.

Poe's Short Stories

Poe was a master of the short story. In addition to writing many Gothic tales of terror, he invented a new type of short fiction, the detective story. His first detective story, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” combines Gothic horror with solid reasoning by Poe's fictional detective, Dupin.

Poe's stories illustrate his idea that any artistic composition should have a single, unique effect. This effect is evident in the gloomy, ominous beginning of his short story “The Fall of the House of Usher,” guaranteed to make the reader long for sunshine or the comfort of his or her own room.



Abbey in an Oak Forest, 1810. Caspar David Friedrich. Oil on canvas. Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin.

from *The Fall of the House of Usher* by Edgar Allan Poe

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable;

for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul . . .

Reading Check

Comparing and Contrasting In what sense were Poe and Emerson both Romantics (see pages 178–179)? How did their Romanticism differ?

Before You Read

The Devil and Tom Walker

Meet **Washington Irving**

(1783–1859)

Named after his country's first president, Washington Irving won the battle for America's literary independence. He was the first American storyteller to be internationally recognized as a man of letters.

"[Washington Irving is] the first ambassador from the New World of Letters to the Old."

—William Makepeace Thackeray

Lawyer and Writer The youngest of eleven children, Irving was born in New York City to a wealthy family with strict moral values. Though he had little formal education, he took an interest in the study of law, later working in the law office of Josiah Hoffman. Irving and Hoffman's daughter Matilda fell in love, and they were engaged.

His interest in law began to dwindle, however, and in 1802 he started to write, publishing satirical essays in a New York newspaper. He soon began to publish a series of periodical essays called *Salmagundi*. The success of *Salmagundi* steered Irving away from law and toward writing.

Success and Heartbreak In 1809, under the pseudonym Diedrich Knickerbocker, he published his most popular work, Knickerbocker's *A History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*. This book was a humorous combination of history, folklore, and opinion that delighted readers with sketches of the customs and families of old New York. That same year, however, Matilda died suddenly of



tuberculosis. Overwhelmed by grief, Irving put his writing on hold. Haunted by the memory of his lost fiancée, he was never to marry.

During this dark period, Irving traveled often, eventually moving to Europe to manage his brother's business interests. In 1818, after the family business went bankrupt, Irving resumed writing.

International Acclaim *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* (1819–1820) established Irving's literary reputation in Europe. The book included two stories that later became classics, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle." Irving borrowed the plots of these stories from two German folktales and then placed them in the Hudson Valley.

Irving eventually returned to the United States, where he continued writing—travel books, histories, biographies of Columbus and Washington, and more tales and sketches. His enormous popularity earned him recognition as the father of American letters. Irving's distinctively American settings and character types later influenced a range of authors, including Romantics, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, and regionalist writers, such as Mark Twain and William Faulkner.

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Author Search For more about Washington Irving, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GLA9800u2.

Before You Read

The Minister's Black Veil

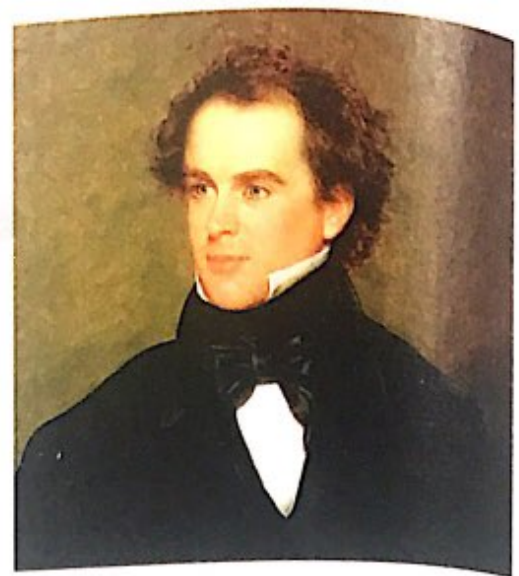
Meet Nathaniel Hawthorne

(1804–1864)

What do you think it would be like to spend a dozen years in self-imposed solitude? Nathaniel Hawthorne did just that, reading widely in New England history and perfecting his skills as a writer. The dark Puritan past haunted Hawthorne's imagination. His ancestors included one judge who had prosecuted Quakers in the 1650s and another who had served in the notorious witchcraft trials at Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. No churchgoer, Hawthorne was still as keenly aware of problems of sin and guilt as any early Puritan. He explored complex questions of right and wrong in tales he called "allegories of the heart"—stories that teach a moral principle.

Habits of Solitude Born in Salem, young Hawthorne was an avid reader of poetry and stories of adventure. He also spent long periods alone in the remote Maine woods, where "I first got my cursed habits of solitude." After attending college in Maine, Hawthorne returned to Salem, where he secluded himself at home for the "twelve lonely years" of his apprenticeship as a writer. He produced two books, first a novel titled *Fanshawe* and later a collection of short stories, *Twice-Told Tales*. The novel was a failure, but reviewers praised *Twice-Told Tales*, and the book sold well. In the late 1830s, as Hawthorne was beginning to establish his reputation as a writer, he met and fell in love with Sophia Peabody, whom he married in 1842. The couple moved to Concord, where Hawthorne socialized with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. However, Hawthorne was not in sympathy with Emerson's optimistic outlook and goals of reforming society.

Literary Success Unable to support his growing family as a writer, Hawthorne returned to Salem and took a government job that he disliked. When



he lost the job, he turned again to writing, completing his masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter*, in early 1850. The book was a sensation, and Hawthorne soon followed it with another successful novel, *The House of the Seven Gables*. During this period, he moved his family from Salem to the countryside, where a close neighbor was the writer Herman Melville. The two writers, who shared a dark view of human life, spent a great deal of time together.

"What other dungeon is so dark as one's own heart! What jailer so inexorable as one's self!"

—Nathaniel Hawthorne
from *The House of the Seven Gables*

In ill health, struggling to continue writing, and depressed, Hawthorne died in 1864 while on a journey. In his writing, he tried to create "a neutral ground where the Actual and the Imaginary might meet." When he succeeds, his fiction has, as the literary critic Alfred Kazin observes, "the mysterious authenticity and the self-sufficient form of a dream."

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