

Romanticism and the American Renaissance (1789-1861)

In the early 1800s America faced a difficult challenge: how to create its own culture. America had a growing appetite for prose fiction focused on American issues and grown from American imaginations. Calls for an American literature began during the Revolution and became more frequent and urgent as independence was assured. America began developing its own distinct literary tradition. American writers were naturally influenced by their English and European heritage and thus not totally original in form or content; however, there was an elusive "American" quality about the new literature. Herman Melville, commenting on the risks American writers must take, stated, "It is better to fail in originality than to succeed in imitation."

Over the course of the 19th century the country progressed from an agricultural economy concentrated on the Eastern seaboard to an industrialized nation that spanned the continent. With the dramatic changes in the nation came dramatic changes in literature. When the century opened, only a handful of novels had been written, but by mid-century American fiction rivaled the best in the world. Biography and history remained strong; religious writing, on the other hand, had substantially declined in importance.

Among the first manifestations of nationhood was the recognition that America had its own language and that American English differed from British English. Noah Webster led a call for uniquely American traditions in language and literature, and he undertook the massive project of developing an American dictionary. Webster published his first dictionary in 1806. What made this work radical was his insistence on defining words based not only on traditional English usage but also on American variations in usage, called Americanisms, and his inclusion of at least 5000 new words not previously recognized by English dictionaries.

Washington Irving was one of the first successful writers of American fiction. *History of New York* (1809) was a satire on the exaggeration and earnestness often found in local histories and seemed to reflect America's desire to break away from established forms of writing and to engage more fully in the world of imaginative literature. Through his satires, sketches, and short stories, Irving was one of the most influential American authors of the first half of the nineteenth century. Among Irving's best-known legends are "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," both appearing in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819-1820). These stories and others like them provided American legends and helped shape and American folklore.

America's westward expansion generated political prose, especially in light of *manifest destiny* – a belief that the country's territorial expansion was not only inevitable but also divinely ordained. The term *manifest destiny* was coined by writer John Louis O'Sullivan in 1845.

With westward expansion came displacement of Native Americans. From the early 1800s on, anguished speeches were presented by Native American leaders who faced a bleak future.

Biography and autobiography served the new nation's sense of its history and its need for heroes in the 1800s. Biography often merged with legend, as well. Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett were favorite figures for legendary biography. The greatest development in nineteenth century biography was the slave narrative. Frederick Douglass created a masterpiece of the genre with *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845).

The sentimental novel is a major form of American fiction that grew out of the responses of white writers to the abuses of slavery. The most famous and historically significant work of American sentimental fiction is *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851) by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Sentimental fiction aimed to arouse pity for the oppressed and offered a natural form for novelists writing about the evils of slavery. Stowe's novel also had a profound political impact. President Abraham Lincoln is credited with having described Stowe as "the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war," referring to the American Civil War.

During the late 1700s and early 1800s, romanticism was the dominant literary mode in Europe. In

reaction to the Enlightenment and its emphasis on reason, **romanticism stressed emotion, the imagination, and subjectivity of approach.** Until about 1870 romanticism influenced the major forms of American prose: transcendentalist writings, historical fiction, and sentimental fiction. **Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe** all incorporated romantic elements in their fiction.

The self-confidence and nationalism of the newly created United States of America energized fiction as well as nonfiction. Historical fiction was an expression of romanticism in its probings of human nature and emotions and its romanticizing of the American past and the American frontier. **James Fenimore Cooper** was the first master of the form, and along with Irving, one of the few writers who could make a living by writing. Cooper wrote a series of five novels called the **Leatherstocking Tales**, which includes **The Last of the Mohicans**, and focuses on the adventures of Natty Bumppo, a white man living among Native Americans in the forests of the American Northeast. Cooper's writing presents the image of the Native American as the "noble savage."

The American Renaissance

Between 1840 and 1855, in New England and especially in Boston, group of American writers produced a remarkable body of "classic" American literature, which included Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), and *Leaves of Grass* (1855) by Walt Whitman. This period has been referred to as **The American Renaissance.**

Classicism & Romanticism

Classicism (Age of Reason):

- • reason dominates nature and human nature
- • scientific in nature: governed by fixed, unchanging laws
- • reason over imagination
- • social over personal
- • common over individual
- • upholds tradition; resists change
- • rational thought & logic: "I think; therefore, I am"
- • objectivity

Romanticism

- • greater personal freedom for the individual
- • emphasis on emotions
- • intuition: inner perception of truth; not reason
- • key is imagination
- • social progress and spiritual growth
- • humanitarian reform (abolitionists, feminism)
- • change, growth, development
- • democracy
- • subjectivity