



The Romantic Period in American Literature and Art

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Lesson Transcript

Ask a Question

This video introduces American Romanticism, a movement where literature focused on intuition, imagination and individualism. Authors such as Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow contributed to what became known as the American identity, as the new country did its best to distance itself from European tradition.

American Romantic Literature

The American Romantic period, which lasted from about 1830-1870, was a time of rapid expansion and growth in the United States that fueled intuition, imagination and individualism in literature. When you think about stories that are labeled 'romantic,' you probably think of a romance novel, where some half-dressed woman has some Fabio-esque guy hanging all over her. That is NOT what we're talking about in the American Romantic period. Don't get me wrong: like those stories, Romantic literature is both adventuresome and improbable, but it's a lot more than just a randy love story.



Literary escapism was a response to the downsides of the Industrial Revolution

In 1830, just fifty years after the Revolutionary War, America was still really young, but its citizens were anxious to create their own identity that was uniquely American and not so reliant on European values. Therefore, the American Romantic movement challenged the very rational thinking that we saw in the Age of Reason during the Revolutionary War. This period produced fewer instructional texts and more stories, novels and poetry.

Within these stories, novels and poems, there are five characteristics that we can use to identify American Romantic literature. These are:

1. Imagination
2. Individuality
3. Nature as a source of spirituality
4. Looking to the past for wisdom
5. Seeing the common man as a hero

Imagination

The first of these characteristics is imagination. This falls in line with the Industrial Revolution, which was a great time of progress. In many cases, when there is progress, there is also great optimism. People start to imagine what could happen next, and progress continues. On the flip-side of that, with that much progress, a lot of people began migrating to big cities that were becoming overpopulated. The cities became dirty and disease-ridden, so it's no surprise that many people wanted to escape that. Therefore, the American Romantic writers embraced that notion through **escapism**.



Irving is recognized as the father of American literature

Escapism is where the mind allows you to escape harsh conditions by taking you to a place that is purely beautiful. Characters in Romantic literature are often journeying away from the city and into the countryside to a place that's not totally realistic, a place that has improbable and even supernatural qualities. The authors develop these places - with **imagery** to make the reader experience the locale as if it were real. **Washington Irving**, who's known as the father of American literature, wrote a story called 'Rip Van Winkle,' which is about a man who wanders out into the woods to escape some chores his wife is asking him to do. After falling asleep for twenty years in the woods, he not only escapes his chores but his wife as well because she's dead. This fanciful escape is typical during this time, but it's something we still see in movies today. Think about the movie *Avatar*. Jake Sully is able to escape by assuming a new identity in a beautiful new world. Even the audience, as they watch, is able to escape reality as they experience the fantastical world of Pandora. So, we see escapism continues today.

Individuality

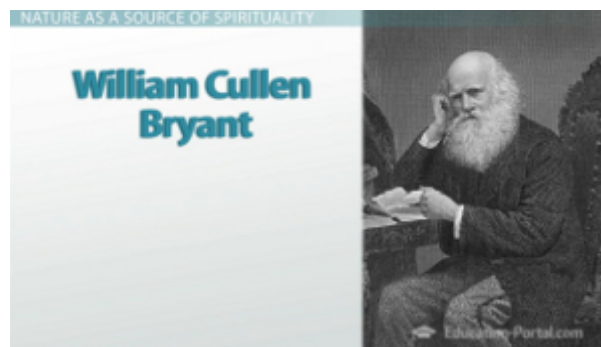
The second characteristic used to identify American Romanticism is individuality. As people are moving into the frontier, they are establishing new areas in ways that best suit their needs. Not only are people moving across the country but into the country. **Immigration** begins creating what we now call the 'melting pot' in America. As a result, you see not only people creating an identity for themselves, but the country creating its own identity as people with different social pasts come together to create something new.

Americans also wanted to distance themselves from Europe and become intellectually independent. This shows up in literature with characters who live on the outskirts of society. Kind of like that old-school cowboy, they aren't going to follow the norms that have come over from Europe; they're going to follow their intuition and their feeling, and they're going to embrace this newly found freedom and become individuals.

Ask a Question

Nature as a Source of Spirituality

Third, we have nature as a source of spirituality. Remember, initially, the **Puritans** were coming to the Colonies to escape religious persecution in England. Those Puritans' ideas did not disappear when the country was established. During this time, the Romantics wanted to embrace that spiritual root that was planted by the Puritans. To do that, they're taking what was established in that spiritual realm, but then taking it into nature. Where the Puritans saw nature as savage, with the Devil hiding behind every tree, the Romantics really are finding God in nature. They believed that they could achieve high levels of insight and information about the world around them just by going to nature. **William Cullen Bryant** was a poet during this time, and he wrote a poem called 'Thanatopsis.' It's a prime example of looking into nature for spiritual insight. He explores death through the life cycles that we see in nature. He finds comfort both for the living and for the dying. In his point of view, death is just a chance to go back to nature.



Bryant focused on the linkage of nature and spirituality in his poetry

Wisdom from the Past

The fourth characteristic is the idea that wisdom can be gained from the past. Writers, like Washington Irving, used old legends to create new stories. And whereas the novelists and short story writers tried to distance themselves from European tradition in writing, the poets stuck to that tradition. Their form is the same. Their techniques are the same. However, they are truly

unique in their content in that they are looking at the pure nature America has to offer and are using that for their inspiration. This encourages a group called the **Fireside Poets**, who are known because people sat by the fire and read their poems in the evenings, kind of like how we sit and watch our favorite TV shows at night. It was a form of entertainment and a popular form at that time. There are four Fireside Poets that you should know. All of them have really long names. We have **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow**, **John Greenleaf Whittier** (how about that for a fantastic name?), **Oliver Wendell Holmes**, and **James Russel Lowell**. These four guys were well-known in their time, and even though their style was not unique, the Fireside Romantic poets are still recognized as some of America's greatest poets ever.

Common Man as a Hero

As our final characteristic, we have the common man as our hero. Prior to this time, the European hero had been established as sophisticated and educated. Ben Franklin fits into this mold. He was educated. He was an inventor. He helped establish the country. This is a man who was looked up to as a hero. The American Romantics turned away from that. James Fenimore Cooper is known for writing the first American novel, starring the character Natty Bumppo. That name does not sound very heroic, does it? But Bumppo becomes the first American hero. He's young, he's innocent and awkward with the ladies, but he has a solid moral code, even if he doesn't always follow society's rules. He has intuition about people, he loves nature and he's questing for a higher truth. He's a character like Luke Skywalker - one day he's out shooting womp rats and the next he's flying an X-Wing. Indiana Jones is also a good example of the American hero. He doesn't change as he tackles his adventures, but we know that his heart is always in the right place.



Cooper wrote what is considered the first American novel

Lesson Summary

In summary, you can identify American Romantic literature by the five characteristics that make it unique.

1. **Imagination and Escapism:** Characters taking a journey from the dirty city into the supernatural countryside.
2. **Individuality:** Individuals embracing freedom by following intuition and going exploring.