

AP English Language and Composition

American Romanticism

American Romanticism was the new country's first distinct literary and artistic movement. It flourished from about 1820–1860.

American Romanticism is a positive, hopeful movement with its origins in the American landscape as well as a revival of religious feelings during the Second Great Awakening.



Romantics believed in the goodness of human nature and the moral perfectability of man.

Romanticism's most important philosophers were Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and its most important fiction writers were Nathaniel Hawthorne and Hermann Melville. Emerson was the chief Transcendentalist thinker, seeing nature as a conduit to God. We will read excerpts of Emerson's "Nature" and "Self Reliance" as well as a novella and a short story by Melville.

American Romanticism's most important poets were Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. The Fireside Poets were popular. These poets—William Cullen Bryant, John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, etc.—wrote verse that was relevant and accessible, though sometimes predictable and sentimental. Dickinson and Whitman were controversial in different ways, which we will discuss after we finish *The Scarlet Letter*.

Edgar Allan Poe was an important writer and literary critic. His work was less invested in nature and more like the European Romantics with their love of the gothic and macabre (think: *Frankenstein*). Romantic writers accepted death and wrote about it openly.

Writers like James Fenimore Cooper idealized the Native American as a "noble savage" living in nature; other writers similarly championed the common man and American individualism. In valuing nature, American Romantics favored a primarily agricultural lifestyle, and reacted, as did their European counterparts, against emerging industrialism.