

Literary scholars view American romanticism as the primary intellectual and aesthetic movement of the first half of the 19th century. The appellation serves both a chronological function (i.e. a given text is identified as coming from the “Romantic era”) and categorical function—through the identification of a text containing romantic element.

While it’s often difficult to quantify the elements that make a text romantic, there are a series of cultural, political and aesthetic influences that shaped the American Romantic movement. This brief overview will provide you with an examination and explanation of some of the most common aspects of romanticism as a social and literary force in mid 19th century American writing.

What is Romanticism?

Romantic literature often focuses on the personal experiences of the writer or her subjects. It is often idealistic and mystical. Perhaps most importantly, it is frequently introspective. This is particularly apparent in the works of the Transcendentalists, which I’ll discuss later in this introduction.

Where did it come from?

American romanticism draws heavily on a mixture of social and literary influences. Romanticism was a driving force in the poetry of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelly, John Keats and George Gordon, more commonly known as Lord Byron. These poets dominated English literature in the early years of the 19th century.

English romanticism flowered in an age of political optimism and profound social change. The industrial revolution provided considerable fodder for romantic authors who viewed with ambivalence the rise of the industrial classes. The factories and slums of the age inspired Wordsworth and others to look to the rustic people of agrarian England as a foil to the exploitation and depredations of Europe’s nascent manufacturing culture.

Politically, European romantics were deeply inspired by radical critiques of the social caste system. Among the most influential were Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Origins of Inequality Among Men* and *The Social Contract*. A core principle of Rousseau’s political ideology was the belief that humans were born in a state of noble freedom in nature. Within this natural state, humans possessed a degree of natural equality, devoid of social class or hierarchy. Those closest to this primitive natural beauty were the healthiest and most virtuous, unspoiled by “civilizations’s” social structures that bind humanity to a system of endless strife, greed and com-

petition.

The impact of Rousseau's writings extended beyond the arts: by the 1790s, a wave of democratic sentiment swept over the European mainland most conspicuously in France. There was a palpable hope among intellectuals and laborers alike that this nascent movement would sweep aside the moribund institutions of nobility and the corrupt rule of industrialists. Artists across the continent initially praised the French revolution, and many saw in Napoleon the shape of a future European democracy.

Napoleon's ascension to the erstwhile throne of much of Europe left many of these artists bitter and disillusioned, and ultimately led to the creation of a more conservative strain of continental romanticism, as seen in Wordsworth and Coleridge's later writings. Other's remained passionate social activists, but much of the fire had died with a Jacobian terror and under the boot of Napoleonic imperialism.

Artistic and Philosophical Roots

As a literary movement, romanticism's reaction against 18th Century neoclassicism closely parallels its rejection of traditional social structures. Neoclassical literature had its own philosophical roots, primarily in John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke's belief in empiricism as the root of all knowledge, his disbelief in innate ideas and the resulting distrust of the imaginative process were driving forces in neoclassical literature and thought.

John L. Mahoney writes that neoclassical literature tends to convey "the intelligent, disciplined, and formal expression of the wisdom of the past—a richly denotative language, a clear and decorative imagery, a firm and rhythmic meter" (4). It is rational, self-conscious, traditional and conservative. There is a strong emphasis on style and formal technique. Tradition, an acknowledgement of and adherence to the rules of the past and the incorporation of scientific principles held sway.

Romanticism rejected these formalistic elements as cold, unimaginative and divisive. Wordsworth writes a pair of complementary poems on this subject: "Expostulation and Reply," and "The Tables Turned." Read together, they act as a veritable manifesto of romantic thought:

EXPOSTULATION AND REPLY

"WHY, William, on that old grey stone,
Thus for the length of half a day,
Why, William, sit you thus alone,
And dream your time away?"

“Where are your books?--that light bequeathed
To Beings else forlorn and blind!
Up! up! and drink the spirit breathed
From dead men to their kind.

“You look round on your Mother Earth,
As if she for no purpose bore you; 10
As if you were her first-born birth,
And none had lived before you!”

One morning thus, by Esthwaite lake,
When life was sweet, I knew not why,
To me my good friend Matthew spake,
And thus I made reply:

“The eye--it cannot choose but see;
We cannot bid the ear be still;
Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
Against or with our will. 20

“Nor less I deem that there are Powers
Which of themselves our minds impress;
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness.

“Think you, ‘mid all this mighty sum
Of things for ever speaking,
That nothing of itself will come,
But we must still be seeking?

“--Then ask not wherefore, here, alone,
Conversing as I may, 30
I sit upon this old grey stone,
And dream my time away,”

1798.

THE TABLES TURNED

AN EVENING SCENE ON THE SAME SUBJECT

UP! up! my Friend, and quit your books;
Or surely you'll grow double:
Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;
Why all this toil and trouble?

The sun, above the mountain's head,
A freshening lustre mellow
Through all the long green fields has spread,
His first sweet evening yellow.

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:
Come, hear the woodland linnet, 10
How sweet his music! on my life,
There's more of wisdom in it.

And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!
He, too, is no mean preacher:
Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your teacher.

She has a world of ready wealth,
Our minds and hearts to bless--
Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,
Truth breathed by cheerfulness. 20

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:--
We murder to dissect.

political democracy virtually inconceivable in the 1790s, the new land was in the grips of an industrial revolution that would create the same social caste system seen in Europe. More conspicuously, the United States was wrestling with social institutions that undermined the validity of the foundational principles of human equality. Women were mobilizing in an effort to gain access to the political apparatuses of the republic. Even more divisive at the time was the issue of slavery, which would ultimately lead to the devastating schism of the 1860s.

Many of the American writers of this period would become actively involved in social causes, as did the English poets half a century before. While they could ultimately claim a degree of victory the Europeans never enjoyed—slavery was abolished, whereas the European monarchies so reviled by liberal authors would stand for another century—the horrors of the American Civil War would bring about the decline of romanticism as a literary movement.

What was unique about the American romantics was their sincere, if perhaps unsuccessful attempt to differentiate themselves from the tradition and aesthetics of the continent.

The Rise of Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism was the culmination of a number of social, religious and philosophical changes. Unitarians and Universalists had rejected Puritanical conceptions of religion, particularly the doctrine of predestination. However, transcendentalists found the Unitarian critiques of earlier Protestantism as excessively logical and divorced from emotional connection. One of the great paradoxes of Transcendentalism was that its radical critique of religion helped to fuel an nascent evangelical movement in northern cities that had once been the bastions of Enlightenment rationalism. The critique of traditional Protestantism helped in many respects to spawn a rebirth of Christian orthodoxy, albeit in different clothing.

This is not to say that transcendentalists would identify themselves with today's religious fundamentalists or their philosophies. Few things could be further from the truth, for while the transcendentalists' critique did much to lay the foundation of contemporary evangelical Christianity, Emerson, Margaret Fuller and the other great practitioners of transcendental philosophy drew their inspiration from a variety of sources: German philosophy and biblical criticism, eastern religious texts and a deep belief in the power of an individual's intuitive powers.

This focus on individual experience as gateway to truth initially undermined social activism among transcendentalists, however, it would drive most transcendentalists into social activism particularly concerning the rights of slaves and women. If intuition and experience led to truth, and truth ultimately to "salvation," then any institution that prevented an individual from aspiring the highest levels of experience and divinity was counterproductive and ultimately deserving of abolition.

While transcendentalism's left a power legacy, the movement's semi-cohesion collapsed

in the wake of the Civil War. After all, it was difficult to maintain much faith in humanity's innate divinity after 640,000 Americans died on the fields and in the camps of the American Civil War. Some went so far as to lay much of the blame for that cataclysmic event partially at the feet of the social advocates who helped to push the country ever closer to the precipice of violence.

Fred Jordan
Wheeling Jesuit University
2005